



## Memoirs as a Source of Historical Research

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### ABSTRACT

Written monuments of personal origin, in other words memoir literature, occupy an important place in the study of the past. They can be called evidence reflecting the reality of the past in writing. Memoir literature is important from the point of view of source studies and is widely used in various fields of humanitarian knowledge. This article discusses the role of memoirs in the truthful reproduction of the past. It is concluded that in the disclosure of a certain event or historical period, memoirs can serve not as secondary, but as the main historical sources.

### Keywords:

memoirs, written monuments, diaries, memoirs, chronicles, event, historical source

In the study of history, among other written sources, memoir literature occupies an important place. Memoir literature, consisting of memoirs, diaries and letters, is also called sources of personal origin. Since this type of sources is associated with the personal lives of specific people.

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Sources of personal origin can be divided into two groups: memoirs and personal-communicative written sources (letters, essays, etc.). Memoirs (French “memouires”, Latin “memoria” – memory) are the author’s memories of historical events in which he took part or witnessed them. According to the encyclopedic dictionary of F.A. Brockhaus and I.A. Efron, the memoirs also include a description of events known to the author from

eyewitnesses. N.P. Zagoskin also approves this opinion and defines memoirs as follows: “Memoirs are understood as the stories of people who witnessed these events or heard about them from other people or know about them from other similar sources”. I.L. Sirotina defines them as follows: “Memoirs are a story or reasoning of the author based on his personal experience and recollection of events that really happened in the past” [3].

Based on this, memoir sources can be defined as follows: memoirs are works about past events in which the author personally participated or was a witness, or the author knows about them through other witnesses. The memoirs contain facts that are not found in other sources, but are important for the reconstruction of the course of events.

Memoirs complement and clarify information from other sources. According to P.A. Zaionchkovsky: “The value of memories is determined not by the assessment of what is happening, because it is almost always subjective, but by the actual description of events” [2].

Indeed, in the process of studying memoirs, the events reflected in them should be of paramount importance for the researcher. The attitude of the author to these events should be assessed based on the personality of the author and the historical context in which the work was written. E.V. Tarle, reflecting on the very subjective nature of the memoirs, says that “the author deliberately seeks to show people and their work in a certain way: to reveal something, hide something, distort something”. However, this does not mean that one should look at the events described in the memoirs with distrust and doubt their veracity. Since the main feature of memoirs is that they were written by a witness, the author first describes the event as it is, and then reacts to it, and for the researcher, information about how the event happened is important first of all.

I.L. Sirotina proposes to classify memoirs as follows:

1. Chronicle memoirs (created immediately after the events): diaries, letters, notes, travel notes, etc.
2. Memoirs (created on the basis of memories after a certain period of time): autobiographies, memoirs, artistic portraits, etc.
3. Artistic memories (partly from memory, partly from notes from different years, publications, own impressions, memoirs of other authors, own and other people’s letters, etc., usually artistically processed, edited works) [3].

The scale of the events described and the chronological coverage of the memoirs are different. If some of them are small articles devoted to individual historical episodes, others cover events of almost half a century and reflect a broad panorama of the life of society [1].

In memoirs, a detailed description of the past largely depends on the author’s memory and personal impressions of the events. However, memoirs cannot be associated only with the personality of the author, because they definitely capture the atmosphere of their time. The sincerity of the author, the completeness and reliability of his impressions will depend on the period in which the memoirs were written. The object of memories – an event or a

historical person – is also important. Often the author tries to show his role in this or that event, the attitude of this or that historical figure towards it. The main conditions of memoirs are fidelity to historical truth, presentation of facts, consistency of narration, avoidance of anachronisms. These formal features bring memoirs closer to diaries, but their distinctive feature is that, unlike diaries, memoirs require a retrospective look at historical events, an appeal to the distant past, and a reassessment of events based on the author’s experience. The retrospective aspect of memoirs is not always positive. In this regard, when referring to the source of the memoirs, it must be taken into account that the interval between the events described in the memoirs and the time of their writing has a certain influence on the reliability of the facts and the author’s point of view. This increases the possibility of various errors in memories – distortion of events, loss of details, inability to remember names and titles, etc. At the same time, a long period of time makes it possible to calmly and correctly assess the past, objectively look at one’s personality, and distinguish minor events from major ones.

According to the content, reliability and absence of fictitious information, the memoirs are close to historical prose, scientific biographical, autobiographical and documentary historical essays. However, unlike an autobiography, in memoirs the emphasis is not on the personality of the author, but on a description of the historical conditions surrounding him, the socio-political, cultural and other historical events with which he is to some extent connected.

At the same time, unlike strictly scientific genres, memoirs are characterized by the manifestation of the views of the author, his personal assessment and approach to events. A contemporary may sometimes give frank and unintentionally false information because of his belonging to a particular category or class. Meanwhile, memoirs are almost always inferior to documents in accurate presentation of facts. For this reason, historians have to compare the events of the memoirs with the available objective data. If one or another memoir fact is

not confirmed or refuted in the available documents and sources, its existence in historiography is considered only as a scientific hypothesis.

In source studies, a 'technology' for critical analysis of memoirs has been developed. Historians use memoirs only after carefully determining their original value. First of all, it is necessary to study the personality of the author and the events described from the point of view of time and space. The first task of the researcher using memoirs is to find out who was their author, what prompted him to write memoirs, what was his goal, what was his point of view.

In the course of this analysis, it is necessary to pay special attention to the presence or absence of changes in the author's worldview in the period from the time when the events took place to the time when the memoirs were written. This aspect is especially typical for memoirs-memorials.

When critically analyzing memoirs, it is important to identify the sources of information provided by the author. We said above that the presentation of the events known to the author according to the information of witnesses is also of a memoir nature. Based on this, it is possible that the author did not personally observe some events in the memoirs. But they were known to him through specific persons. Considering that these persons witnessed the events with their own eyes, the information provided by them can be considered reliable. At the same time, this information should be studied in comparison with other sources.

Based on the retrospective nature of the memoirs, we said that their main source is the memory of the author. But sometimes when writing memoirs, additional sources are used. In addition to his memory, the author of the memoirs draws on additional sources in at least three cases: to restore the sequence of events in his memory; for a full presentation of that part of the events in which the author did not personally participate; and finally, to further substantiate their arguments. The use of additional sources increases the level of completeness and reliability of memories.

The lecture "Memoirs, their significance and place in a number of historical sources" (author N.D. Chechulin), text of which published at the end of the 19th century, mentions the source study significance of memoirs, that they are valuable information for studying the mental and spiritual structure people of a certain period and society, which makes it possible to understand the attitude of people to the events of that time. The lecture quotes Prince K. N. Bestuzhev-Ryumin: "One line of memoirs can explain what entire collections of diplomatic notes and official documents cannot explain" [7].

Based on this phrase, N.D. Chechulin notes that there are periods when official documents are unclear or incomplete for one reason or another, and memoirs significantly supplement the available information about them. In memoirs, it is important not only what is written, but also how it is written, which reveals the spirit of that time; in the process of reading memoirs, we gain a deep understanding of how people thought and felt in the past, how certain events influenced them, and thanks to this we find the "key" to many events that would otherwise remain obscure.

In order to give a correct characterization of a certain period and society, the main attention should be focused on the historical background of events, and not on visual facts, because he describes the period, describing what was normal for that time. In order to understand this background, it is necessary to pay attention not to the enthusiastic phrases, accents and instructions of the author, but to the events that he described as calm, ordinary things, because it is these events and people's reaction to them that characterize the era and society.

In historiography, memoir sources have long been regarded as auxiliary material, "revitalizing" the historical description. The role of memoirs was often determined by the fulfillment of three tasks: the clarification of historical facts, the "concretization" of historical works, and the giving of an emotional coloring to the study. The fact that memoirs not only reflect "living" information about the past,

but also serve the historian as a “hidden”, “encoded” means of comprehending the events that happened and can happen, was not taken into account [5]. In our opinion, memoirs in source studies should be approached not as auxiliary sources, but as works that provide complete information about the past. Since the memoir part of the work is considered original and unique. The same period can be described differently in one or another memoir source. The fact that one author focuses on what another does not pay attention to, and an event to which one author gave a positive reaction, another may have a negative attitude, increases the possibility of understanding historical truth through the analysis and comparison of these sources.

Despite their peculiarities and, in a certain sense, the blurring of the boundaries of the genre, memoirs belong to a number of valuable historical sources that specifically reflect the past and provide a lot of information for studying the life and spirit of society as a whole and individual social groups. With the help of memories, it is possible to restore the historical conditions in which events took place, the atmosphere of a particular period, to determine the causes of people’s behavior. Sometimes memoirs may cite partially or completely unpublished or unknown documents, letters, etc. In some cases, memoirs serve as the only or main source for us, allowing us to learn about certain periods of history, about specific aspects of events.

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