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## **V.N. Tatishchev as the First Russian Cultural Studies Scholar**

### **Abstract**

This article offers, for the first time in the scholarly literature, an analysis of the contribution of Vasily Nikitich (Nikitovich) Tatishchev to the theory of world culture. It provides a brief biography of the first comprehensive Russian historian and geographer, who approached these disciplines from rationalist positions, employing source criticism, and drawing on the achievements of Western European scholars of his time. Taking into account Tatishchev's experience in scholarship and education, the author analyzes his approach to defining the stages of development of world culture, to which a section of his extensive work (*A Conversation Between Two Friends on the Benefits of Science and Schools*) is devoted. The article examines in detail the scholar's views on the typology and periodization of world culture. Tatishchev proposed his own periodization of the development of world culture, identifying the causes of humanity's rapid progress in the process of knowledge: the invention of writing, the emergence of Christianity, and the

invention of printing. All these changes, in Tatischev's view, were connected with the spread of knowledge and ethical norms, which allowed humanity to move from barbarism to a civilized society. The article also considers the convergence of this approach with the so-called "technological" ("activity-based") approach developed in the second half of the twentieth century by the Armenian philosopher and cultural theorist Markaryan. This approach assigns a central role in the development of human culture precisely to changes in technology and modes of activity. For the first time in Russian scholarship, the concept of the development of world culture formulated by Tatischev in the first half of the eighteenth century is interpreted as the first attempt to create a theory of world culture.

**Keywords:**

V.N. Tatischev; Science; Theory of world culture; Periodization; Typology of cultural studies; Technological approach

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he name of Vasily Nikitich Tatishchev has long been known in the academic world as that of the first Russian scholar, naturalist, historian, archaeologist, geographer, and economist<sup>1</sup>. According to the assessment of G.V. Plekhanov, he was “the first Russian enlightener”, and in the opinion of Dr. V.I. Vernadsky, thanks to Tatishchev, in Russia “independent scientific and creative work in natural science began”<sup>2</sup>. Tatishchev took the first steps in almost every field of scientific knowledge of his time. However, his role in the establishment of the science of culture — cultural studies — has not yet been revealed, and indeed, he was the first in Russia to propose and substantiate a typology and periodization of the development of world culture.

V.N. Tatishchev was born in 1686, and his development as a person took place during the most turbulent time of Peter’s reforms: from 1706 to 1712, he served as a cavalry officer and participated in several battles of the Northern War, and was wounded in the Battle of Poltava in 1709. From 1713 to 1716, he was a pensioner of Peter the Great and studied engineering and artillery in Prussia and Saxony. His superior in the field of artillery was Jacob Daniel (Vilimovich) Bruce, a close friend of Peter the Great. It was Bruce who insisted on Tatishchev’s transfer from the cavalry to the artillery with the rank of engineer-ensign.

In this position, the young specialist supervised artillery operations near Königsberg and Danzig in 1717. A year later, he was entrusted with choosing a place for negotiations between Russia and Sweden.

Tatishchev’s career under Bruce’s direction progressed rapidly: in 1719, he began compiling a geographical description of the entire Rus-

<sup>1</sup> See: Юхт А.И. Государственная деятельность В.Н. Татищева в 20-х — начале 30-х годов XVIII в. М.: Наука, 1985; Шакинко И.М. Василий Татищев. М.: Мысль, 1987; Кузьмин А.Г. Татищев. 2-е изд., М.: Молодая гвардия, 1987; Софронова А.М. В.Н. Татищев как выдающийся деятель просвещения в России первой половины XVIII в.: к 330-летию со дня рождения. Екатеринбург, Изд-во Уральского университета. 2016 и др.

<sup>2</sup> Плеханов Г.В. История русской общественной мысли. Кн. 2. Ч. III. М.; Л., 1925. С. 122.



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sian state with maps. But as soon as he became engrossed in studying the geography of Russia, his organizational talents were needed in the Urals, and from 1720, Tatishchev began working on creating factories for the production of silver and copper. In 1724, he was promoted to advisor of the Berg College and soon was sent to Sweden and Denmark, where he remained until 1726. Upon his return, Tatishchev was appointed a member of the Moscow Mint Office, and in 1734, became the head of the state-owned mines in the Urals. In the 1730s, Tatishchev made many enemies, was accused of bribery, and imprisoned in the Peter and Paul Fortress, but not stripped of his ranks. He was sent back to the Urals to create new factories, then appointed governor of Astrakhan (1741–1745). In his last years, beginning in 1746, he spent time in a village near Moscow, where he finally had the opportunity to devote himself to writing his *History of Russia*, which was published only 18 years after his death, in 1768.

Tatishchev's turbulent biography was always accompanied by educational activities. He founded not only copper smelting facto-

ries but also mining schools. While abroad, Vasily Nikitich acquired a large collection of valuable scientific publications of a natural, philosophical, geographical, and historical character. Having assembled a large library, he donated it to the mining school that he had founded. His busy government career was accompanied by constant scientific work in many fields. And in all these endeavors, he would always introduce innovations and proposals for the development of various branches, striving to get to the bottom of things and to trace the history of various undertakings in order to understand them independently.

One of his most fundamental and profound works was *A Conversation Between Two Friends on the Benefits of Science and Schools*, which G.V. Plekhanov rightly called “almost an entire encyclopedia”<sup>3</sup>. Indeed, this work includes 121 brief questions and 121 detailed answers on the most significant problems of science and culture of the time. N.A. Popov, Tatishchev’s biographer, discovered and published this work<sup>4</sup>. This comprehensive and multifaceted volume was studied mainly by the scholars interested in Tatishchev’s philosophical views, influenced by Christian Wolff, Samuel von Pufendorf, Walch, Hugo Grotius, Leibniz, and other famous philosophers of the time. Researchers noted Tatishchev’s deism and free-thinking, that is, the benchmarks of the Enlightenment, which specialists usually see alongside rationalism and anthropocentrism. Indeed, Tatishchev was undoubtedly the first Russian thinker of the Enlightenment persuasion and saw his task as spreading such views in the contemporary society. A good definition of “enlightenment” as a phenomenon is given in the dictionary *Культурология в терминах и понятиях* (*Cultural Studies in Terms and Concepts*) published in 1995: “an intellectual movement of the era of transition from feudalism to capitalism, characterized by the desire of human reason to penetrate into the secrets of being”<sup>5</sup>. It was precisely this irresistible

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. P. 124.

<sup>4</sup> Попов Н.А. Татищев и его время: Эпизод из истории гос., обществ. и част. жизни в России первой половины прошедшего столетия. СПб., 1861.

<sup>5</sup> Кононенко Б.И. Культурология. Большой толковый словарь. М., 2003. С. 5.



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desire to penetrate into the secrets of being, and above all human self-consciousness, that drove Tatischev in writing this monumental work.

The *Conversation* begins with the question: What is the benefit of taking a son away from his family and sending him to foreign schools? The brief answer is: “Reason without learning and ability without habit and art cannot be acquired. And thus, in order for the reason to exist, one must first learn...”<sup>6</sup>. And then objections and disputes begin about whether science is necessary for true human well-being, what science is, and so forth. The author’s final conclusion is remarkable: “The main goal of science is for a man to know himself” (p. 51). Then there are discussions and debates about internal and external knowledge, the eternal

<sup>6</sup> Татищев В.Н. Избранные произведения. Под общей ред. С.Н. Валка. Л.: Наука, 1979. С. 51. Further page references are given in parentheses in the text.

and the temporal in man, knowledge of what is good and evil, and so forth. In doing so, Tatishchev avoids engaging in religious disputes, referring to the fact that he reasons “not about church or spiritual teaching, but about secular philosophy... according to natural law” (p. 60).

From question no. 29 about the stages of human age (infancy, youth, manhood, old age) Tatishchev moves on to expound his concept of the development of world culture. First, he explains that in infancy man is “stubborn, unwilling to obey anyone, ... fierce, inconstant, ... always wanting something new, and therefore for learning the easy sciences ... it is the best time. For this reason, it is convenient that children be taught languages from the very infancy, for their mind ... is like soft wax ...” (p. 67). Then, in response to the question “What do we notice in the stage of youth?” the scholar gives the answer: “... a sharper memory and a free mind, ... passion for luxury or bodily pleasures prevails. ... Yet (the person) is prudent, bashful, and easily accepts instruction for sciences requiring greater judgment; they are better learnt in this state” (p. 67). The highest stage of human development — “the stage of manhood” — is described by Tatishchev as follows: “Then perfect sense and intuition appear in him, as well as sufficient judgment. ... Glory-loving appears in him, courage and manhood, he desires respect from all, and then seeks power, ... and despises the strength of others” (p. 68). The analysis of the features of the stages of human life concludes with question no. 33: “What is old age? And what would man need to learn in old age?” To this question, Tatishchev answers in detail, noting that “... in old age, man realizes that everything formerly considered happiness is the deepest foolishness ... Then he will be most diligent in acquiring knowledge of the true good, that is, peace of soul ...” (p. 68). The conclusion is as follows: “... man must live a lifetime and learn a lifetime and guard himself from harm, for until old age he is not capable by nature of knowing true good, ... man from the beginning of life even unto old age has the necessity and benefit of learning, and that learning is light, and lack of learning is darkness...” (p. 68).

This detailed analysis of the stages of human development leads the author to a very important comparison of human development in the course of life with the development of the world: “The whole world is similar to man, whom the ancients called the microcosm. But as far as the sciences and reason of past peoples is concerned, we can equally say of them as of a single man, that from infancy they showed nothing, in youth they showed little that was useful, and only coming into the stage of manhood, they barely began to show anything useful” (p. 70). Thus, Tatischev applies an anthropological approach to the interpretation of the development of the world as a whole and of world culture in particular, although the concept of “culture” did not yet exist at that time. For Tatischev in the first half of the eighteenth century, culture amounted to “universal enlightenment of the mind”. In essence, however, culture, meaning literally “cultivation”, in Tatischev’s system meant cultivation (of a person) by science and knowledge. In this, Tatischev was not alone, since in Leonty Magnitsky’s *Arithmetic* of 1703, there already was a requirement that the human mind “be enriched with science”, develop, and help man achieve “the honor of this world” and “the satisfaction of necessities”, that is, well-being<sup>7</sup>.

Beginning with question no. 36 (“How do you divide the state of the whole world into the stages of infancy, youth, etc.?”), the scholar moves on to the periodization of world culture. He asserts that “... the first enlightenment of the mind came from the discovery of writing, another great change was made by the coming and teaching of Christ, the third by the discovery of the printing of books” (p. 70). By distinguishing three main periods in the development of world culture, Tatischev connects two of them (the first and the third) with, if we may say so, the technology of spreading knowledge and sciences: the invention of writing and the invention of printing. The second important period in the development of world culture is connected with the appearance of Christianity. Then he goes on to explain in detail what each of the three discoveries of mankind attributed to world culture.

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<sup>7</sup> Леонтий Магницкий. Арифметика. М.: Печатный двор, 1703. Л. 3–8.

The discovery of writing is called a great change: “Just as an infant without speech ... cannot express his opinion and desire and make others understand him, ... similarly our forefathers without writing could not preserve in memory and teach others what was useful for them”. The end to this period of ignorance, superstition, evil-doing, and ferocity came with the invention of letters, for “...then soon came books, necessary for the instruction by intelligent people, full of brotherly love, in which histories of past times or teachings for our benefit were presented ..., others began to compose spiritual and civil laws and instruct men to good and restrain them from evil” (p. 71). Tatishchev’s particular condemnation is aroused by paganism, which in his interpretation “was even more than brutal delusion, for not only the heavenly lights, but also fire, and air ..., beasts and reptiles ..., stones and trees, herbs were revered as gods, and divine powers and properties were ascribed to them” (p. 72). Tatishchev calls Venus, Jupiter, and others “vile gods”, condemns the Egyptians for their deification of cats, crocodiles, and so forth. But to the objection contained in question no. 40 (“Who were the best philosophers of that time and what did they teach?”), he gives a detailed and very erudite answer, telling about the achievements of Pythagoras, Aesop, Socrates, Plato, and Epicurus, emphasizing that these sages in the period of underdevelopment of world culture “due to the unreasonableness of men received the name of atheists instead of gratitude” (p. 74). He goes on to clarify that man by nature has the capacity to know God, which was proven by Tertullian, Anthony the Great, Augustine, and Chrysostom in their books and “that ... our Demetrius of Rostov, archbishop, affirms it” (p.76). This is the first time that *Conversation* quotes Tatishchev’s compatriot Dmitry (Demetrius) of Rostov, which clearly proves his knowledge of the Metropolitan’s works. In demonstrating his knowledge in the field of philosophy, Tatishchev also distinguishes among “general philosophy” such sciences as jurisprudence, mathematics, geometry, astronomy. This rather extensive survey also includes a defense of “intelligent and learned men” accused of atheism and called godless, among whom Tatishchev names Virgil “for teaching that the

Earth is spherical”, Copernicus “for writing that the Earth circles the Sun and the Moon circles the Earth”, Descartes “for refuting Aristotelian philosophy and for teaching that all things should be proven by true proofs and not empty syllogisms”, Pufendorf “for explaining natural law” (p.76). With these words, the description of the first period in the development of world culture, called by the author “the infancy of the world”, is concluded.

The second period in the development of world culture, Tatischev connects with the acceptance of Christianity, posing the question: “What change did the coming of Christ cause in the sciences?” (p. 76). The answer is as follows: “(It was) a great and essential enlightenment of human reason ... And this enlightenment was not only spiritual but also moral ...” (p.77). Finally, the third stage of the development of world culture is connected, in Tatischev’s view, with the beginning of printing, since “... through printing, even if a hundred copies [of books. — *L.Ch.*] were lost, still a thousand or more of the same would remain ... and through them a greater light of true reason was revealed, and (as a result of that) in theology, philosophy, law, mathematics, physics, history, and other liberal sciences, as well as in useful crafts, great improvement appeared ...” Tatischev calls this period “the present age” and “the perfect manhood” of mankind (p. 78–79).

The last section of *Conversation* is devoted to discussing the system of sciences of that time, among which Tatischev distinguishes “elegant” sciences (poetry, music, dancing, etc.), “curious and vain” sciences (astrology, physiognomy or face-reading, chiromancy, alchemy, etc.), “harmful sciences”, in which he places witchcraft, divination, sorcery, necromancy, and others). The treatise concludes with an assessment of the state of science and schools both in Russia and abroad, as well as discussions on natural law, politics, “rules of wisdom, reverence, justice, prudence”, and so forth (pp. 91–132).

Thus, in his reflections and conclusions regarding the development of world culture, Tatischev was far ahead of his time. According to our observations, during the era of Peter I, people were only beginning to find a word that could define the concept

of “culture”. For Tatishchev’s contemporaries, such a concept was the word *politichnost’* (urbanity, worldliness, education, refinement and courtliness), which was close to the ideas of “culture” or “civilization”. For people of that time, *politichnost’* meant the same as culture, namely the refinement of a natural (primitive) man (barbarian) through the development of reason (“enrichment of reason with science”, according to contemporaries) and pursuit of arts, literature (especially poetry) and music. Teachers of the Slavic-Greek-Latin Academy put into circulation such expressions as *politichnost’* of state, customs, manners, cavaliers, and so forth, meaning the above-mentioned definition of this word. The most frequent user of these combinations was the teacher of philosophy and prefect of the Slavic-Greek-Latin Academy Joseph Turoboisky. Thus, in *The Glorious Triumph of the Liberator of Livonia*, describing the triumphal gates in Moscow in 1704, Turoboisky wrote about the special task set by Peter I before the teachers of the Slavic-Greek-Latin Academy: to instruct students in the *politichnost’* of manners, that is, to educate courtly cavaliers: “...not only in divine writings, but also in worldly histories and all sorts of *politichnost’* we are commanded to instruct Russian youth”<sup>8</sup>. It was on these gates that a picture depicted Peter I in the image of, as was said in the description, an “urbane (*politichny*) cavalier” along with depictions of him as pagan gods and ancient heroes, as well as biblical figures (Mars, Jason, Hercules, etc.). The word *politichny* in the sense of “cultured” was heard then not only within the walls of the Slavic-Greek-Latin Academy but in the most varied sources, beginning with P.A. Tolstoy’s notes on his travels through Europe and ending with the decree of the Senate awarding Peter I the titles “Great” and “Father of the Fatherland” in 1721<sup>9</sup>. This approach to understanding culture can be called “behavioristic”, i.e., focused on the behavior of people in society, which organically fit into the concept of “Europeanization” proposed by Peter the Great and his

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<sup>8</sup> Преславное торжество свободителя Ливонии. М., 1704. Л. 4.

<sup>9</sup> See: Черная Л.А. Представления о «политичном кавалере» и «политичной даме в России Петровского времени // Диалог со временем. 2020. Вып. 70. С. 397–405.

supporters. Tatischev, on the other hand, did not use the concept of *politichnost'*; he proposed his own, new approach to understanding culture, which in many ways coincides with the contemporary activity-based approach.

In modern culture studies, there are more than 500 definitions of the concept of “culture”, numerous different approaches to its study, beginning with the value-based (axiological) approach and ending with the game-based approach and the “system of prohibitions”<sup>10</sup>. E.S. Markaryan developed and gained widespread recognition for his so-called “activity-based” or “technological” approach, which defined culture as “a specific form of human activity, including an extremely complex and multifaceted system of suprabio-logically developed mechanisms, through which human activity is stimulated, programmed, and realized in society”<sup>11</sup>. This approach in theory of culture is also called “technological”, indicating that technology in this context refers to historically changing norms, values, procedures, techniques, which together characterize the way of human activity at a given stage of development of mankind. The complex and deeply objective observations of E.S. Markaryan are, of course, far removed from the direct, common-sense-based reasoning of Tatischev; however, it is undeniable that the enlightener of the first half of the eighteenth century was thinking in the same direction. The change in the method of obtaining information after the invention of writing and then printing undoubtedly influenced the development of human knowledge in all areas of human activity in the strongest way.

The concept of the development of world culture expounded by Vasily Nikitich Tatischev in *A Conversation Between Two Friends on the Benefits of Science and Schools* can be regarded as a sort of “precursor” to the activity-based approach. Tatischev was the first in Russia to propose an anthropologically-based typology and an “activity-based” periodization of the develop-

<sup>10</sup> See: Черная Л.А. Культурология: основы теории. М.: «Логос», 2003. С. 3–103.

<sup>11</sup> Маркарян Э.С. Теория культуры и современная наука (Логико-методологический анализ). М.: «Мысль», 1983. С. 19.

ment of world culture, pointing to the method of human activity as the foundation for cultural evolution. Based on this, V.N. Tatishchev can with full justification be considered the first Russian cultural studies scholar, and a theorist of the development of world culture.

### Conflict of interests

The author declares no relevant conflict of interests.



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