

## An evening with the historian Apollon Borisovich Davidson

### Abstract

On September 8 the historian Apollon Borisovich Davidson spoke about his career at a Q&A at the Memorial centre in Moscow under the auspices of the Free Historical Society. This report of his fascinating first-person narration focuses on the specificity of autobiographical practice in the hands of a professional historian.

### Autobiographical reflection as historical practice

For much of the twentieth century historians viewed autobiographical self-testimony as a subjective, unreliable source in contrast to the objective evidence of official documents. Since the 1970s, however, historians have increasingly come to see the limitations of official documents, which present the “truth” as the authorities wanted others to see it.<sup>1</sup> As a result, scholars have identified the value of private sources as comparative material in the study of official sources.<sup>2</sup> And if historians use autobiographical testimony in their own research, why should they not contribute their own voices to this ever-expanding corpus?

In the case of Soviet historians, the need for such first-person testimony is acute. To begin with, as Soviet citizens they lived in exceptional times that Soviet historiography described through the prism of official narratives. Moreover, historians who wanted to challenge official narratives were affected in a personal way due to censorship and other state interventions.<sup>3</sup>

In a sharp critique of Soviet historiography the historian Apollon Borisovich Davidson spoke about his career at a Q&A at the Memorial centre in Moscow under the auspices of the Free Historical Society on September 8, 2016.<sup>4</sup> In particular, he endeavoured to set the record straight on the historiography of the Leningrad blockade and the conditions in which historians lived and worked after the war before taking questions from his captivated audience.

### The Leningrad Blockade: “I am a living witness”

Professor Davidson began his talk by commemorating the start of the blockade of Leningrad 75 years before to the day, on September 8<sup>th</sup> 1941. He described himself as “a living witness” in using his own personal testimony to critique official narratives.

He remembered the people in his communal apartment taking stock of the blockade, and hearing as a 13-year old how they responded to Stalin’s speech at the military parade on Red Square in 1941. While this parade is now famous for the departure of troops and equipment from Red Square to the front line on the approaches to Moscow, Stalin’s claim for Germany’s immanent internal collapse is often overlooked. Professor Davidson accordingly quoted Stalin’s gung-ho

<sup>1</sup> See *Egodocuments and History: A Short Account of the Long Durée*, Michael Mascuch, Rudolf Dekker and Arianne Baggerman, *The Historian*, vol. 78 (2016), pp. 11-56, esp. 25-30.

<sup>2</sup> See the “Egodocuments in History” series, published by Brill, for studies of egodocuments as sources that capture the voice of witnesses on current events, especially in times of historical stress.

<sup>3</sup> On recent debates about the stenographs of the workplace meetings during the campaign against cosmopolitanism in 1948-9, see Yuri Zaretsky, “1949 год. Москва, собрание медиевистов,” *Стратегии понимания прошлого: Теория, история, историография*, М., Новое литературное обозрение, 2011, с. 95-127

<sup>4</sup> (<https://www.hse.ru/org/persons/1229366>). For the podcast of his talk, see [http://urokiistorii.ru/podcast/08092016\\_davidson.mp3](http://urokiistorii.ru/podcast/08092016_davidson.mp3). Professor Davidson’s talk largely followed his book of memoirs, *Я вас люблю. Страницы жизни*, М., МИК, 2008.

expectation that “Germany is bleeding to death, her human reserves are running out [...] Only a few months, only half a year, perhaps a year – and Hitler’s Germany will burst under the weight of its crimes.”<sup>5</sup> By contrast, Leningradtsy had far more bitter and realistic expectations about the war and did not trust the leadership.

Professor Davidson did not focus on the trauma he experienced at the time. His testimony thus did not reveal the quotidian everyday in the way that egodocuments do. Instead he stressed that Soviet newspapers did not document the blockade and the authorities did not acknowledge its existence, for example Kalinin only called on the people of Leningrad to “tighten their belts” in his new year address, nearly four months later, at a time when hundreds of thousands of people had already died. As to how people lived and survived, he noted that Leningradtsy created a museum that commemorated their trials during the blockade. But the authorities closed it in 1949. In consistently exposing the negative attitude of the party hierarchy to Leningradtsy under siege, Apollon Borisovich’s testimony was closer to the sort of critical public journalism that the authorities blocked.

#### The path of the critical historian in the Soviet period

In Professor Davidson’s narrative the opposition of Leningradtsy to the official party ran smoothly into the opposition of intellectuals to the party line in Soviet academic institutions. However, if opposition to the ruling party’s mistakes during the blockade had been widespread among the people of Leningrad, the speaker identified the critical current in university as a minority.

Apollon Borisovich set the scene by describing the conditions in which academics engaged in history as an academic discipline during the campaign against cosmopolitanism. He recounted that on his first day, September 1 1948, the first wall poster that he saw announced that [Vladimir Vasil’evich Mavrodin](#), the head of the faculty, would present a lecture on “The tasks of historical science in the light of the results of the session of VASKhNIL,” i.e. [the Lenin All-Union academy of agricultural sciences](#). At this point members of the audience interjected that the authorities wanted to repeat in the teaching of history the well-known attack on Soviet biologists in a reference to Stalin’s support at the August session of VASKhNIL for Trofim Lysenko’s position, which banned mention of Western names such as Gregor Mendel in the study genetics.

Apollon Borisovich continued by noting that in his lectures on medieval history, professor Mavrodin repeated the phrase “under the chime of swords, the singing of shots, Russia emerged on the world arena.”<sup>6</sup> As a first-year student Apollon Borisovich approached his teacher and asked him why he spoke in such a manner. Professor Mavrodin led him to a corner and explained “history exists in two forms: either as a science or as a patriotic genre.” Professor Davidson underlined that professor Mavrodin was a decent man in an indication that his teacher wanted to pursue history as a science. Yet despite his best efforts to remain at the helm, where he could at least exert some influence on students, Mavrodin was sacked and expelled from the party in February 1949 as part of the campaign against cosmopolitanism.

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<sup>5</sup> This translation comes from the text of Stalin’s speech on the website of the Russian ministry of defence’s site: <http://encyclopedia.mil.ru/encyclopedia/history/more.htm?id=10769032@cmsArticle>, The original text reads: “Германия истекает кровью, ее людские резервы иссякают [...] Еще несколько месяцев, еще полгода, может быть годик, — и гитлеровская Германия должна лопнуть под тяжестью своих преступлений.”

<sup>6</sup> The original quote in Russian reads: “под звон мечей и пенье стрел Россия выходила на мировую арену,” quoted in Apollon Davidson, *Я вас люблю. Страницы жизни*, М., МИК, 2008, pp. 84-88.

The new head of the faculty was [N.A. Kornatovsky](#), formerly head of the department of Marxism-Leninism, who introduced himself before his students in a meeting that was characteristic of the times. Kornatovsky began by noting that those present would become historians and teachers of the Soviet people and asked rhetorically: “can we trust you?” No, he answered, in recognition of the paranoia of the Soviet hierarchy. He justified the cynicism of the party elite on the grounds that the students did not know the life of the Soviet people. For example, he asserted that they had not been on submarines, even though in 1949 there were a number of war veterans among the student population. In conclusion he referred to recent elections to the Supreme Soviet in which the Communist Party received more than 99% of the vote but stressed that a tiny minority had still voted against the Party. He assumed some of those who voted against were sitting in front of him. To them he said ominously “we don’t know who you are yet, but we will do.”

Kornatovsky then received anonymous notes from students, one of which stated simply “Stop this nonsense.”<sup>7</sup> Kornatovsky demanded to know who the author was. After threatening to check their handwriting a student called Misha Chigrinskii declared himself as the author. He was called to the front and an impromptu trial was held. Fifth-year students who wanted to get good appointments on leaving university actively denounced him. One of them, who later became head of the Suvorov military museum, said that he could not breathe the same air as the culprit. Others then shouted out that he should be expelled immediately from the *komsomol* and from university. A few days later Apollon Borisovich referred to this unsavoury incident to a female student who he had sat next to at the time. Although she had echoed the denunciations, she replied that she could not remember her response, which professor Davidson attributed to the herd instinct dynamic.<sup>8</sup>

In March 1949 professors were placed in a humiliating impromptu trial of their own where they had to repent of their mistakes or denounce others before an audience of students during the campaign against cosmopolitanism. Apollon Borisovich gave the example of academic [Vasilii Struve](#), an expert in ancient Egypt, who refused to comply with these rules and simply said “I have PhD students who need a supervisor.” Despite such depressing moments, the campaign against cosmopolitanism sometimes descended to the ridiculous. In counter-acting bourgeois American historiography, it was not permitted to quote reactionary American texts because that would involve propagating them. Yet in order to prove that a fellow historian was guilty of quoting from American sources, an expert in French history quoted his opponents’ use of quotes. Thereby the denunciator quoted the original texts and became guilty of the crime of which he was accusing his opponent.

Professor Davidson then gave the example of the major historian [Yevgenny Tarle](#), who was sacked from the university on 31 June 1949. When his students found out that he had said that he would only return to the university if the students asked him, they delegated Apollon Borisovich to invite him to speak. He arrived at Tarle’s just after a delegation of workers from the Putilov factory. Tarle related that he had asked the workers if there was no one else to speak, and in reply they complained that other speakers merely read from the papers. Tarle then tapped the papers on his desk and said to Apollon Borisovich “You cannot speak about the current international situation without reading foreign papers.” This was significant because it was forbidden to read foreign sources, even from Eastern bloc countries. Apollon

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<sup>7</sup> The original quote in Russian is “Прекратите пороть чепуху”

<sup>8</sup> The author of the note in the end was apparently let off after this scare.

Borisovich took Tarle's comment as a sign that serious students should research beyond the narrow margins of official rhetoric.

Overall, it would appear that after the war the official party line received much stronger endorsement from Apollon Borisovich's fellow students than was the case in his communal apartment during the war. Yet some students took risks in challenging the authorities. As Apollon Borisovich subsequently found out, it was a policy of the faculty authorities to expel a student every semester in order to inculcate a climate of fear and blind obedience. In one such case, a student called Yuri Baranov whose *anketa* was clean was caught during a break drumming his hands against a desk in tact with jazz music, which was officially banned. His fellow students were supposed to denounce him but did not do a very good job of it. The affair was passed on to fifth-year students who boldly stated that they did not see an issue to begin with. However, this example of student solidarity did not save the student. When he did not turn up to an exam, other students went to his home to see what had happened and found out that he had been arrested and given a ten-year sentence.

Professor Davidson recounted how he first conceived of his goal of becoming a historian. A neighbour in his block of flats had a passion for history and an exceptional library but, as the son of a doctor from an aristocratic background, could not enter university.<sup>9</sup> Thanks to his books Apollon Borisovich had access to Nabokov and the writings of Lev Gumilev, and it was then that he developed his interest in the Silver Age, which emerged as a vector of interest among post-1917 Russian émigré writers but had not arrived in Soviet letters due to censorship. Unable to study this period due to censorship, he chose the area of African studies, not least because there was not a developed field to begin with and he would therefore be less inhibited by directives from above.

In turning to his professional career, professor Davidson reinforced the tension between what he was expected to say, and thus conform to Soviet rhetoric, and what he wanted to say. He recounted how following the Cuban missile crisis of 1961, the American administration came to the conclusion that they did not adequately understand what the Soviet leadership really thought. Their response was to negotiate an official meeting place to encourage dialogue between the US and the USSR, which on the Soviet side was arranged by [Georgii Arkad'evich Arbatov](#), the head of the Institute of American and Canadian studies. When the Americans wanted to discuss geopolitics in Africa in the 1970s Evgenii Primakov, then at the Institute of Eastern Studies and later Prime Minister in 1998, invited Professor Davidson to the gathering but did not disclose any details about it. On the first day Apollon Borisovich was called to speak first, not sure if he was supposed to speak according to Soviet discourse or express his own analysis. He chose to speak his mind. Afterwards Arbatov came up and declared "you spoke as a professional."

The Q&A: The model of the historian and the history of people

During the Q&A colleagues asked questions about the problems and potential of Africa, the legacy of Mandela and the threat of resurgent nationalism in response to globalisation, including in the recent Brexit referendum vote in the UK. Professor Davidson identified a shift in the global relations as a result of the inflow of migration from Asia and Africa to Europe and North America and noted that the Silver Age poet [Sergei Solov'ev](#) (among others) had anticipated this shift. He also suggested that

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<sup>9</sup> The neighbour was Georgii Leonidovich Grigor'ev (1913-1980). For details of professor Davidson's relations with him, see *Я вас люблю. Страницы жизни*, pp. 79-84.

Nelson Mandela's conciliatory position in South Africa serves as an example for a different type of politics, in contrast to the widespread focus on military conflict.<sup>10</sup>

In reply to the question as to whether he had any doubts or regrets about his choice of profession or any of his research interests, professor Davidson said that he did not have any regrets. He referred with approval to [P.A. Zaionchkovskii](#), an expert on Russian history, who believed that while a chemist or physicist might not always have to be ethical in their work, a historian did. For Apollon Borisovich this ethical core was the main justification for the work of the historian.<sup>11</sup> Flowing from such an ethical viewpoint, the speaker identified as one area of interest the study of the history of people as an approach in historiography. Professor Davidson also mentioned another, more specific goal as that of writing about the people he learnt from in his youth in Leningrad, as in his earlier example of the local history of the blockade.

In urging colleagues to seek ways of peaceful negotiation and mutual understanding professor Davidson praised the benefits of face-to-face communication due to the importance of intonation and gestures in conveying a personal, ethical message.<sup>12</sup> The speaker's oral as opposed to written medium of communication thus underlined the performative potential of his self-account as part of his critique of authoritarian historiography. To this end he quoted Vystosky's words that "We learn a lot out of books// But the truth we learn by word of mouth."<sup>13</sup> And indeed, as we listened to Professor Davidson, his argument invited us to identify our own ethical position and thus reproduce his challenge to the authoritarian negation of individual ethics in the writing of history.

A further series of questions related to professor Davidson's work on the Silver Age, which he was able to publish works on following the collapse of the USSR. While Apollon Borisovich admitted that he could not adequately answer the question as to why Nikolai Gumilev returned to Soviet Russia in 1918, he noted that the brief years during the early Soviet period were Gumilev's most productive. He also referred to interviews he conducted with Gumilev's wife Anna Akhmatova and later with his last surviving student [Irina Odoevtsova](#), who returned to the USSR in 1987. On the question of the reliability of the memoir testimony of Silver Age writers, Apollon Borisovich related that Odoevtsova had herself described the [memoirs](#) of her husband [Georgy Ivanov](#) as "literature." By contrast, professor Davidson highlighted the value of [Odoevtsova's own account](#).

Professor Davidson's praise of Irina Odoevtsova's memoirs may reflect an underlining similarity in their approach as historical witnesses. The publishers of Odoevtsova's memoirs printed on the front cover her opening declaration that "I am not writing about myself or for myself, but about those people that I was able to get to know "On the banks of the Neva"." As she elaborated, she was "only the eyes that saw them, only the ears that heard them," and thus as "one of the last who saw and heard, I am only the living memory about them." Her sentiment here echoes with

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<sup>10</sup> Professor Davidson mentioned in passing that his biography of [Cecil Rhodes](#) was translated into English and published by the South African government, which chose his work over hundreds of others.

<sup>11</sup> He also highlighted the help he received from [N.A. Yerofeev](#), whose work [Misty Albion](#) he singled out for special praise.

<sup>12</sup> At this point Professor Davidson noted that the rise of the internet, including in the provision of lectures in higher education, worries him, and stressed the importance to him of face-to-face communication with his students.

<sup>13</sup> Мы многое из книжек узнаем, // Но истины передают устно, quoted in *Я вас люблю. Страницы жизни*, с. 6.

professor Davidson's presentation of himself as "a living witness" who spoke not so much about himself but the people he knew in the past.

Although it did not surface during the Q&A, the question arises as to the reliability of the testimony of professor Davidson. Scholars of the genre of memoir have highlighted the potential for a gap between what an individual may have felt at a given moment in their past and their later retrospective account of that moment. Memoirists may present self-accounts that fit their public reputation at the time of writing, as Georgy Ivanov did in a way typical of literary figures and politicians. By contrast, the premise of professor Davidson's testimony was that his views in 2016 are an accurate description of his views in the past. But since his account in September 2016 was not written contemporaneously with the events they describe, it does not obviously follow that his testimony can be treated as a historical source in the same way as, for example, the diaries of Leningradtsy written during the blockade.

However, his self-testimony does still contain significant value as a historical source, only its value is different from the nature of retrospective memoir testimony or the personal quotidian experience of egodocuments. Rather, he spoke in the genre of an investigative journalist reporting on the mood of his times. By downplaying the significance of his own actions, professor Davidson underscored the continuity in his critical assessment of Soviet historiography, which he demonstrated with examples that can be independently corroborated. Far from his personal subjectivity undermining the value of his testimony, his practice as a professional historian shaped the quality of his narrative testimony.

For example, at the start of his talk he mentioned Stalin's barbed attack on "frightened intellectuals" who over-exaggerated the scale of German forces.<sup>14</sup> By highlighting that Stalin himself provided official testimony as to the existence of critically minded Soviet citizens, professor Davidson made clear that he was not relaying a conclusion that he came to retrospectively. On the contrary, he was setting the record straight by giving voice to a statement of fact that members of his circle would have documented at the time, if only they had had access to a free press.

However, the claim for continuity between professor Davidson's opposition to Soviet propaganda back in the 1940s does not rule out a role for hindsight. On the one hand, the speaker articulated his negative attitude to the current communicative context, which continues to focus on wars and conflict. Here, he translated the English proverb "no news is good news" as "bad events are news" in calling on fellow historians to pay more attention to the everyday, for example to how people lived during the blockade, as well as to attempts to seek reconciliation rather than pursue aggressive strategies of conflict. The clouds on the horizon of contemporary politics and debates would appear to be an influence on the historian's choice of emphasis here, as he implicitly acknowledged in his replies to questions about the growth of nationalism and the phenomenon of Trump in the USA.

On the other hand, professor Davidson implicitly reflected today's post-Soviet communicative context when he identified as a watershed denunciations of Stalin in the 1950s. The link with the present moment here consists in the fact that anti-Stalin sentiment did not arise retrospectively following the collapse of the USSR but retrospectively following the twentieth party congress. This link framed professor Davidson's reference to intellectuals that he valued such as [Konstantin Simonov](#), [Alexandr Tvardovskii](#) and [Olga Berggolts](#) who had expressed grief following Stalin's

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<sup>14</sup> "Враг не так силен, как изображают его некоторые перепуганные интеллигентики," <http://encyclopedia.mil.ru/encyclopedia/history/more.htm?id=10769032@cmsArticle>

death and later admitted that Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin had opened their eyes. By way of contrast, professor Davidson claimed that his circle of acquaintances in Leningrad did not need Khrushchev's help in opening their eyes. He accordingly wanted to document his circle of Leningrad acquaintances precisely for their consistent anti-Stalin position.

Yet there is a nuance here. Just because Olga Berggolts, to take one of the examples that he gave, expressed grief after Stalin's death, it does not follow that she valued his leadership during the blockade. Indeed, in her diary she recorded her bitter frustration at the failure of the authorities to make contingency plans in the event of a siege of the city.<sup>15</sup> The trauma that Stalin's death provoked in her may thus require a more sophisticated explanation.

Still, the lasting impression from professor Davidson's talk was a stimulus to question accounts from the past. Such living testimony clearly highlights the need to consider carefully how historians may have intended to express views that clashed with official narratives even when, for institutional reasons, they formally remained within official boundaries. Here, in decoding such alternative narratives, a key resource is first-person testimony, which allows scholars to compare texts with the wider personal views of authors.

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<sup>15</sup> Living in Leningrad, Olga Berggolts had been fully aware of the failure of the government to make contingency plans for the defence of the city, see Ольга Берггольц, *Блокадный дневник (1941-1945)*, М., ЭКСМО, 2015.