

STUDENT ABOUT THE TEACHER

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The Russian North in the life and the creative geography of Alexander V. Kamkin

Abstract. The article gives a brief overview of the contribution of the famous Vologda historian, ethnologist and culture studies scholar Alexander Vasilyevich Kamkin (1950-2017) to the study of the history and culture of the Russian North. On the one hand, the North is viewed as a place, or rather a space, where the scientist spent his life and his work was taking place, and on the other hand, as the main object of his interests.

Key words: A. V. Kamkin, the Russian North, Vologda State University, peasantry, orthodoxy, rural parish, ‘sociocultural origins’, ethnography

Introduction

Any biography of a scientist is always, to a certain extent, geography; moreover, a scientist can spend his everyday life and carry out his scientific activities in the place that has nothing to do with the area of his research interests. Alexander Kamkin (1950–2017), Professor of Vologda State University, is in this sense, a pleasant exception. A historian, culturologist and ethnographer, he was always connected with the North, and he has devoted all his life to his studies.

Main part

Alexander Kamkin was born on the 14th February 1950 in Vologda. His father, Vasily Aleksandrovich, a railwayman, came from the village of Alekino, Sokolsky district of Vologda region (previously named as Totsky district of Vologda Governorate). As Alexander Vasilyevich admitted, his grandmother played the main role in



his education, and, as a result, his immersion in the village and the peasant culture harmonized with his initially urban origin. His character integrity, being early laid, as well as the natural curiosity that was common for his generation avid reading, possibly contributed to the development of the works of the historian.

After finishing school, Alexander entered the Department of History at the Faculty of History and Philology of Vologda State Pedagogical Institute. At the very beginning of his studies, he met the outstanding historian Pyotr Andreyevich Kolesnikov (1907–1996). As it later turned out, this meeting significantly determined the fate of the young man. He wrote his first scientific work devoted to the agreements regulating the recruitment of free men engaged as peasants, precisely under the guidance of Pyotr Andreyevich.

In terms of life geography, Pyotr Kolesnikov was a complete opposite of his student. A native of Kuban, he studied and taught in Saratov, and in 1960 moved from Ustyuzhna to Vologda. Apart from Vologda, both Kolesnikov and Kamkin, were unwittingly connected with Totma. In 1957, Kolesnikov wrote and defended his candidate's thesis on Totma's social and economic history in the 17th century.

In Vologda, in the 1960–70s, Kolesnikov's works began to form a scientific school on the agrarian history of the European North. After graduating from Vologda State Pedagogical Institute in 1971, Kamkin also devoted his life to the school, but to a different one. It was the school where he was teaching, secondary school No. 29 in Vologda. In 1977, Alexander Vasilyevich began to work part-time under the guidance of Kolesnikov at the Department of History of the USSR at the recently established Faculty of History at Vologda State Pedagogical Institute. Later, following the insistence of his mentor, he entered the graduate school of the Institute of History of the USSR. His scientific adviser was Ekaterina Iosifovna Indova (1916–95), a recognized expert on the history of the peasantry of the 18th–19th centuries and its social movements. Ekaterina Iosifovna had a very difficult personality and did not have many direct followers among the students. Whilst choosing the topic for her Vologda post-graduate student, she showed perseverance and insight. Partly due to her efforts, Kamkin chose a northern peasant of the 18th century as a 'hero' of his studies. Ekaterina Iosifovna gave this young Vologda teacher and her student a 'winning ticket' to the scientific world of both capitals.

Alexander Vasilyevich always thought with gratitude about his post-graduate years, and especially about the seminars and the discussions of dissertations on the Soviet history during the period of feudalism. These seminars and discussions gave the young researchers a possibility to communicate directly with the distinguished historians – “people from front pages” – and served as a real laboratory for the development of his ideas and as a school for their future scientific growth. Kamkin always paid sincere respect to his 'boss' (as he ironically called Ekaterina Iosifovna) and valued both her peculiar solicitude and elegantly sarcastic sense of humor.

In 1983, at the Leningrad branch of the Institute of History, Kamkin defended his thesis ‘Legal awareness and rulemaking of state peasants in the European North (second half of the 18th century)’. For its time, it was an innovative work with conclusions based on the author's interpretation of sources, both newly introduced into the scientific circulation and already widely known, based on peasants’ instructions to the Legislative Commission. The original, independent and creative character of peasant rulemaking, identified by Kamkin, found its way both in the impact on the elaboration of the state policy and its legislative design, and in common with the legal initiatives that were adopted in the northern volosts. Such initiatives were closely connected to the entire system of peasant settlements, the territorial administrative system and the relations with the authorities defined by the above. Thus, the rulemaking of northern peasants expressed the specific character of their life overall, and their special role in the Russian social universe during the period of Enlightened absolutism. According to Kamkin, such rulemaking was not just the way of objectifying the collective aspirations and interests, but rather peasant’s creativity, the expression of their nature, their special *northern* character and their worldview mostly based on the long-standing traditions of self-government¹.



For Alexander Vasilyevich, the 1980s were not only the peak of his teaching and administrative activities at the Faculty of History at Vologda State Pedagogical Institute, but also the period of intensive research of the archives. They covered not only Moscow (Russian State Archive of Ancient Acts) and Leningrad (Archives of Leningrad Institute of History, Central State Historical Archives), but also the provincial repositories – the state archives of Arkhangelsk and Vologda regions, as well as the archives of Karelia and Komi Republic. His research related to the European North, as he himself defined it², with all the main centers of historical science in the country. At the time, Kamkin became a regular participant of the major scientific conferences:

¹ Kamkin A.V. *Legal Awareness and Rulemaking of State Peasants of the European North (Second Half of the 18th century): Extended Abstract of Candidate's Thesis*. Leningrad, 1983.

² Kamkin A.V. *Public Life of a Northern Village in the 18th century: Ways and Forms of Peasant Social Service: A Textbook for a Special Course*. Vologda, 1990, p. 3.

among them is the Symposium on the agrarian history of Eastern Europe. He was a member of the editorial board and one of the authors of the first volume of ‘The History of the Northern Peasantry’ (for these, he prepared, for example, a paragraph on peasant’s legal awareness and attitude towards the state)³.

For Kamkin, the North as an object of historical study was mostly a space of peasants’ living arrangements with their scenarios, arising and coming to life within traditional peasant communities, communes and volosts. He studied such communes and volosts similarly in terms of space or geography, and, which is more important, in terms of their nature. These administrative subdivisions formed in the North under the conditions of weakened state pressure and a special type of social relations, pushed A.V. Kamkin to the question about a northern Orthodox parish as the key element of the ‘triad’ of peasants’ self-government. The syncretic unity of the territorial, administrative and confessional principles in this self-government-related care about a parish church towards the system of community’s functions and, accordingly, towards the liability of responsible persons and nomenclature of elected positions. Kamkin’s textbook, published in 1990 and devoted to the problems of public life in the northern villages, briefly describes the role of the church, peasants’ religiosity and the Orthodox faith itself in the internal consolidation of the world and its status-role division. Kamkin contributed to this, introducing into the circulation the documents of various church institutions – religious boards and ecclesiastical consistories of the eparchies of Arkhangelsk-Kholmogorsk, Vologda and Olonets, along with the materials of volosts’ local libraries/reading-rooms and management boards. Over time, this led to the conviction that “the re-creation of the history of peasantry is no longer possible because of underestimation or exclusion of the church”, that “a parish did not simply co-exist with the peasant world for centuries but rather merged with its destiny”⁴. Kamkin acted as a restorer of the pre-revolutionary historical and geographical tradition already mentioned in the works of M. M. Bogoslovsky and S. V. Yushkov.

Kamkin’s desire to combine history and geography was not accidental: the whole development of his scientific interests came from one single aspect – peasant studies. Therefore, he never moved from one topic to another, and there was no coincidence. On the contrary, each of his new ideas grew out of the previous ones, thus creating a common system. We might say that the different topics of his work rather enriched each other. Thus, all his previous research experiences prepared and led to his appeal to the history of the Northern Orthodoxy. Emerging towards the beginning of the

³ *The History of the Northern Peasantry*; In P. A. Kolesnikov (Ed.). Arkhangelsk, 1984. V. 1. Peasantry of the European North in the period of feudalism, pp. 339–347, etc.

⁴ *Kamkin A. V. Rural clergy and peasantry in the 18th century. Some problems of parish life in the European North of Russia. The European North: History and Modernity.* Petrozavodsk, 1990, p. 25.

1990s, his approach to the consideration of various forms of social existence of the northern peasantry was initially multidisciplinary. The strength of the documentary basis of the research, the methodological and methodological approaches and the methods of working with the archival materials, taken from the ‘real’ history, were combined with the ethnographic empiricism, orientation on vivid description with the effect of presence and with the analysis of specific phenomena of people's life and cultural generalizations.

In 1992, Kamkin published his main book – ‘Orthodox Church in the Russian North: Essays on history until 1917’. This easy-to-read but thoughtful book, which was not very long, marked another step in the development of not only regional but also national historiography of the Orthodoxy history. It was one of the first experiences of a monographic representation of the problems within the church life from the historical and cultural angle, and yet no other pieces of serious research on that topic have been done without any references to it. The book appealed to a wider audience, which predetermined its educational character, combined, however, with genuine scientific knowledge supported by the strong source base. The book is also very personal in everything, starting from the knowledge and understanding of the phenomena of the church life and ending with the actual religious experience. It regards the church from the point of secular science, as a living spiritual and social organism. Its existence, being part of the historical process, is subordinated to its own inner logic, which cannot be understood without references to the fullness of people's life and without considering the non-rational essence of the church itself, and its inevitable reciprocal influence on the spiritual landscape of the people⁵. This moral and methodological position determined the structure of the work, going from a parish as “the main spiritual and organizational unit” of the church to its other subsystems: monasteries, eparchies and, finally, the clergy, with “guarding, teaching and governing” pastors⁶.

In 1993, Alexander Vasilyevich took his doctorate at the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology of the Russian Academy of Sciences. Kamkin noted that “the topic of a rural Orthodox parish is undeveloped” and considered that a parish should be viewed in parallel with a volost, as one of “organizing and regulating mechanisms of economic, social and spiritual life⁷”. In his thesis, he proposed a typology of northern parishes depending on their demographic characteristics and features of geographical organization and revealed the dynamics of changes in the richness of the network of parishes of the said region.

⁵ Kamkin A.V. *Orthodox Church in the Russian North: Essays on History until 1917*. Vologda, 1992, p. 6.

⁶ Ibid, p. 117.

⁷ Kamkin A.V. *Traditional Peasant Communities in the European North of Russia in the 18th century: Extended Abstract of Doctor's Thesis*. Moscow, 1983, pp. 3, 6, 12.

In the mid-1990s, Kamkin was awarded the title of professor. Having reached the formal peak in his scientific career, he decided to take quite an unexpected step that many people would not understand – he began his work on a series of textbooks for secondary schools under the general title ‘Origins’. In these textbooks, in simple terms, understandable for children, he intended to describe all the main definitions, images and ideas of the Russian folk culture, its subject and spiritual content. It was a very difficult task, which would be feasible only for someone who has the shared bloodline with this culture and lives immersed into it; a task that requires work and talent, which is completely different from what is necessary and common for an academic scientist. Undoubtedly, Kamkin fully achieved this task. Over two decades, ‘Origins’ has become an integrated educational program for primary and middle school (grades 2 to 9) with its own methodological tools, followed by a vast and cohesive community of history teachers from 62 Russian regions, where they teach this course today.

It goes without saying that Kamkin's return to school pedagogy overshadowed his scientific activities, but in no case interrupted them. Moreover, for Alexander Vasilyevich, teaching and ‘enlightenment’ were inseparable from his scientific research. The expert and tremendous methodological work to improve and popularize the course dramatically changed Kamkin’s life. At that moment, he could pick up to Sakhalin or Khabarovsk, only a few days after a performance in Kaliningrad.

It was in the middle and in the second half of the 1990s that Alexander Vasilyevich began his work with graduate students. Under his supervision, they mostly studied the individual issues of ethnography of the church life in the North in the pre-revolutionary and Soviet times. He based his work on the postgraduate studies with the deepest confidence in them and with understanding of their emerging scientific individuality. Kamkin always knew when and to what extent he could get involved in the work of an emerging researcher to direct it in the best possible way. He gave his students freedom of initiative, and therefore the opportunity to make their own mistakes; in return, he demanded only one thing, responsibility in everything, and he did it so delicately that it was impossible not to fulfill this promise. On part of his students, he expected not a stereotyped but creative, genuinely independent view of a topic, and his most important task was to bring a young author to his own discoveries, however small they might be. His reasonable self-withdrawal from the detailed process of thesis writing hid much more concern and respect for his students than the most meticulous and imposed everyday help.

It is natural that the formation of his own scientific school brought Alexander Vasilyevich back to the topic of Vologda. In a series of historical and regional almanacs ‘The ancient cities of Vologda region’, he acted as an editor-in-chief of the issues devoted to Totma, which was so close to him, and prepared several voluminous documentary publications for the topics about Vologda. Within the framework of the in-

ternational scientific project initiated by T. Shanin and V.P. Danilov, Kamkin wrote a detailed article in the format of a chronicle about his father's village Alekino⁸. He combined his homeland studies with the participation in the editorial board of 'The Encyclopedia of Vologda' and of the book of essays under the title 'Vologda in the past millennium', where he wrote chapters on history and topography of the city in the 17th–19th centuries⁹.

Kamkin made considerable efforts to commemorate his teacher P. A. Kolesnikov. He prepared for printing the last book of Pyotr Andreevich – 'Journey to Genealogy' (1997), repeatedly spoke with reviews of his life and work, participated in the organization of conferences dedicated to his teacher¹⁰. This, obviously, contained something more than mere gratitude, duty or even love of a student to his mentor. Alexander Vasilyevich, considering himself a 'graduate' of the scientific school of Vologda created by Kolesnikov, was keenly aware of the need to preserve and pass the tradition that he had laid down, and probably saw this tradition as part of the historical and cultural heritage of the North. Even the short stories about Kolesnikov that sometimes appeared in conversations with his own students (especially those who did not get a chance to see Pyotr Andreevich and to learn from him) were important for Alexander Vasilyevich in terms of passing on this special and personal tradition.

We can feel the same need for promoting continuity in Kamkin's scientific and organizational activities. He became a co-chairman of the revived Vologda Society for the Study of the Northern Territory (Northern Krai) and the chairman of the Northern Department of the Archaeographic Commission. He actively participated in the foundation of the Vologda department of the Russian society of historians and

⁸ Artemova O. V., Beznin M.A., Kamkin A. V., Sablin V. A. Historical sketch on the villages of Alekino, Leont'evschchina, Utkino. *Vologda: Local History Almanac*; In M.A. Beznin (ed.). *Vologda*, Issue 2, 1997, pp. 274–391 (see pp. 274–315 about the village of Alekino).

⁹ *Totma*. *Local History Almanac*; In A.V. Kamkin (ed.) *Vologda*, 1995. Issue 1; *Totma*. *Local History almanac*; In A.V. Kamkin (ed.) *Vologda*, 1997. Issue 2; *Totma*. *Local History Almanac*; In A.V. Kamkin (ed.) *Vologda*, 2001. Issue 3; Kamkin A. V. *Vologda in the 1780s in the memoirs of contemporaries* (A.A. Zasetky. Historical and topographic news, economy notes to the ordnance survey). *Vologda. Local History Almanac*. Vologda, 1994, Issue 1, pp. 279–301. Kamkin A.V., Spasenkova I.V. Reports of Vologda deans (materials on the church history of Vologda [1906–1907]). *Vologda. Local History Almanac*, Issue 1, pp. 440–453. *The Encyclopedia of Vologda*; In G.V. Sudakov (Ed.). *Vologda*, 2006; *Vologda in the Past Millennium. Essays on the History of the City*; In Yu.K. Nekrasov (Ed.). *Vologda*, 2004; *Vologda*, 2006.

¹⁰ See: Kamkin A.V. Pyotr Andreevich Kolesnikov – the historian of Ustyuzhna. *Ustyuzhna. Local History Almanac*. Vologda, 1995, Issue. III, pp. 411–420; Kamkin A.V., Tikhomirov S.A. Pyotr Andreevich Kolesnikov (1907–1996). *Archaeographic Yearbook of 1996*. Moscow, 1998, pp. 401–404; Kamkin A.V. In memory of Pyotr Andreevich Kolesnikov. *Materials of scientific readings in memory of Pyotr Andreevich Kolesnikov*. Vologda, 2000, pp. 3–9; Kamkin A.V. On the author and his book. *Kolesnikov P.A. Journey to Genealogy*. Vologda, 1997, pp. 5–6.

archivists, which acted as an umbrella authority in the organization of the scientific and practical conference ‘Historical local studies and archives’. The conference was taking place in Vologda for nearly two decades (1994–2012) and played an important role in coordinating the efforts of historians, archivists and local researchers, who studied not only the Vologda region, but also the whole of the European North.

The geography of Kamkin’s communication is another special aspect of his creative activity. For many years, Alexander Vasilyevich maintained contact and collaborated with Moscow historians (V.I. Buganov and A.V. Buganov, I.V. Vlasova, M.M. Gromyko, O.V. Kirichenko, A.I. Komissarenko, V.A. Tishkov, K.V. Tsekhanskaya, S.O. Shmidt, etc.), with scientists of Arkhangel’sk (V.I. Goldin, A.A. Kuratov, N.M. Terebikhin, S.O. Shalyapin, etc.), of Petrozavodsk (A.M. Pashkov, M.V. Pul’kin), of Syktyvkar (I.L. Zherebtsov, M.A. Matsuk) and of Yekaterinburg (M.V. Khaidurov, etc.). By the end of the 1990s, Kamkin’s works acquired international fame. For several years, he took part in the Slavic Studies Graduate Colloquium at Sorbonne and worked as a guest lecturer at the University of Innsbruck (Austria). In 1998, the German translation of his monograph on the Orthodox Church in the Russian North was published¹¹.

In 2001, Kamkin organized the Department of Theory, History of Culture and Ethnology as part of the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Cultures at Vologda State Pedagogical University. He built a small but highly professional team of specialists. Today, such professionals as M.S. Cherkasova, Doctor of Historical Sciences, R.L. Krasilnikov, Doctor of Philology, I.V. Pugach and I.V. Spasenkova, Candidates of Historical Sciences, as well as L.A. Yakushev, Candidate of Cultural Sciences, work at the department. The intensive scientific work takes place in parallel with the preparation of students in the focus area of Culturology. Thus, Professor M.S. Cherkasova regularly publishes a commentary edition of sources on the history of Vologda region during the Middle Ages; R.L. Krasilnikov conducts research in the field of literary studies in thanatology; L.A. Yakusheva studies theatrical texts of Vologda for many years.

A.V. Kamkin also played an important role in the revival of historical education in Cherepovets. It is not only that his former students still account for half of the teaching staff of the Department of History (since 2013 – the Department of History and Philosophy) of Cherepovets State University. For many years, Alexander Vasilyevich was the chairman of the state examination and certification commissions for the courses and program studies related to History, helped on the methodological and organizational matters to open a post-graduate program for students studying the his-

¹¹ Kamkin Alexandr W. *‘Was für ein tiefer Glaube’: Zur Geschichte der Russischen Orthodoxen Kirche in Russlands Norden*; Alexandr W. Kamkin. Aussaat Verlag, (1998).

tory of Russia, and in every way contributed to the scientific work of his Cherepovets colleagues.

In the 2000s and the early 2010s, Kamkin's studies of the Russian North came to a qualitatively new level in conceptual and methodological terms. They were devoted to the issues of cultural succession: the changing semiotics of the cultural landscapes of the North, the formation in this region of a network related to places of memory, stable zones and hotbeds of cultural activity, where settlement, administrative arrangement and economic development of the territory and its sacred significance accompanied each other. Such a threefold topography of a place (with natural, administrative/settling and religious aspects) as a network of loci of different orders corresponds to the "universal triad of the world of the Russian North" (volost-commune-parish) and is objectified in the whole system of various images and symbols. Among these symbols are peasant residences, a village, a parish church, a fountain, a spring, a chapel, a road, a monastery, a city, a patrimony, etc. The Soviet and post-Soviet periods brought a new logic of the cultural development of the region, where meanings, symbols and landscapes came to the forefront, that were introduced into the northern environment and that were, on the one hand, associated with forced urbanization, and on the other hand, with aggressive borrowings from the post-Perestroika period.

The program of integrated study of regional cultural transformations since the earliest times until early 21st century was briefly presented to the participants of the master class 'The Russian North: The history of the image' that took place in Vologda in February 2001. It became part of the visiting school ('Winter Academy') of the Institute of European Cultures at Russian State University for the Humanities¹². A. V. Kamkin later devoted a whole series of works to this problem. The most significant one was a collective monograph written by Alexander Vasilyevich's students under his guidance. In this work, the existence of the Orthodox tradition is seen from different angles and perspectives, in terms of Kamkin's integrative approach¹³.

Conclusion

Over the last eight years, Kamkin was seriously ill, but despite that, he continued his work: running the Department at the University, working with young researchers, writing, giving speeches and travelling. His love of life, the subtle sense of humor and wise self-irony always supported everyone who was fortunate to know him, to work with him and to learn something from him. He belonged, probably, to the rarest variety of teachers – those, who by being close to you, make you grow, using casual

¹² See: Kamkin A.V. *Theory of perception: from the verbal to the visual (Materials of the master class)*. Institute of European Cultures. Available at: <http://www.iek.edu.ru/academ/aakamk.htm> (date of access 16.01.2018).

¹³ *Orthodox traditions in the Russian European North in the 18th – 20th centuries*; In A.V. Kamkin (ed.). Vologda, 2007.

jokes, sharp remarks or merely taking looks; who set the mental and moral bars high, so that you want to comply with these standards. An outstanding scientist, he was so simple and modest in communication that it usually took time for his partner to understand the scope of his personality. He was the author of about 250 scientific papers, supervisor of 12 post-graduate theses, but he was never after any ratings, titles or awards. He was certainly a devotee of science and, despite that, was very down to earth.

Alexander Vasilyevich passed away on the 10th December 2017. It is still ahead of us to appreciate his personality, his path in science and his legacy, as an independent historiographical phenomenon. However, one thing is already clear. His contribution to the general framework of study of the history and culture of the Russian North should not be interrupted.

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