FEATURES AND FIGURES OF THE PAST

V. I. Gurko

Vladimir Gurko, coming from a family which gave distinguished service to the Russian empire, entered public service after graduating from the Moscow University at the age of 23. Early in the reign of Nicholas II he was appointed to the Imperial Chancellery and in 1902 was appointed Manager of the Peasant Section and later Assistant Minister of the Interior.

He was gifted and brilliant, a clever, energetic and extraordinarily hard-working bureaucrat, and his ability was early recognized by his contemporaries. Writing of his first speech as government spokesman on the agrarian question, Senator Glinka recalls: "The unsuccessful speeches of the government representatives before the noisy assembly, the feeling of bewilderment, the crushing confusion—and then V. I. Gurko's speech. I remember his slight stature, his loud, harsh voice. Every sentence was charged with feeling, with a biting sarcasm... The sweeping fire of his eloquence revealed him to be a capable parliamentary fighter. This speech proved his outstanding political genius."

This is the man who from first-hand experience gives us this inside story of the Russian government, its leading personalities, and its relations with the Russian public from the accession of Nicholas II to the eve of the Revolution of 1917. From personal observation the author describes the composition and activities of such institutions as the State Council, the Imperial Chancellery, the various ministries, and the State Duma; he makes revealing characterizations of such influential figures of the time as Witte, Plehve, Stolypin, Durnovo, Kokovtsov, Goremykin, and many others, and discusses their relations

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FEATURES AND FIGURES OF THE PAST

GOVERNMENT AND OPINION IN THE REIGN OF NICHOLAS II

By
V. I. GURKO
Late Assistant Minister of the Interior and Member of the Russian State Council

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EDITOR'S PREFACE

VLADIMIR IOSIFOVICH GURKO came of a family which gave distinguished service to the Russian Empire. His grandfather, V. I. Gurko, was an officer in the Napoleonic wars. His father, Field Marshal I. V. Gurko (1828–1901), was one of the principal Russian commanders in the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–78 and was later Governor-General and Commander of the Troops in Poland. The author’s maternal grandmother, Countess Sailhas de Tournemire (Elizaveta Vasilievna Sukhevo-Kobyлина), contributed under the name Evgenia Tur to Sovremennik, Russkii Vestnik, and Russkaia Rech, and wrote a number of novels. She was the friend of Granovsky, Turgenev, Afanasiev, and other literary figures of the mid-century. His brother, General Vasilii Iosifovich Gurko, held many important posts during the World War, including those of Acting Chief of the Imperial General Staff and Commander of the Western Group of Armies.

In 1885, at the age of twenty-three, V. I. Gurko graduated from Moscow University, and immediately entered public service in Poland, first as commissioner for rural affairs and later as an assistant to his father, the Governor-General in Warsaw. In these first years of his career Gurko showed the direction of his interest and the bent of his mind. With characteristic energy he turned to the study of agrarian problems, publishing in 1887 Dvorianskoe zemlevладение в свяzi s местной реформой (“Nobility Landowner-ship in Connection with Local Reform”), and ten years later Ocherki Przysliania (“Sketches of the Vistula Region”).

Early in the reign of Nicholas II, Gurko was appointed to the Imperial Chancellery, an institution which had been the training school of many Russian statesmen and in which he had the opportunity to observe the working and membership of the State Council, which he here so effectively describes. Gurko’s ability was recognized by the head of the Chancellery, the then Imperial Secretary, V. K. Plehve, but his developing bureaucratic career did not turn Gurko from his interest in peasant and agrarian affairs. On the large estates owned by his wife in Voronezh Gubernia he carried on a model farm, studied at first hand the conditions of life and the problems of the peasants, and in 1902 published Ustoi
When Plehve became Minister of the Interior in 1902 he appointed Gurko Manager of the Peasant Section. This appointment was significant, for at the time the government was devoting particular attention to the problems of agriculture and the condition of the peasants. In this office, and later as Assistant Minister of the Interior, Gurko took a prominent part in discussions, interministerial conferences, and the formulation of projects relating to rural administration and agrarian reforms. But his opportunities to observe the involved process of Imperial Government were not, of course, confined to this important question. From such an advantageous post of observation in the ministry most influential in the direction of government policy, Gurko saw the rise and fall of the political fortunes of Witte, Plehve, Sviatopolk-Mirsky, Durnovo, and Goremykin, and he noted the personal traits and contributions of many less-known figures. He saw the blundering progress of Russia’s costly adventure in the Far East and the fumbling measures to meet the rising tide of unrest among peasants, workers, and liberals. With his keen mind, his talent for character portrayal, and, it may be added, an eye for the frailties of human nature, Gurko brings to life the scene of the historic years 1902-1906—the clash of personalities and opinions, and the struggle to control and guide the tremendous forces in the social and economic life of the country.

One of the high points of Gurko’s public career at this time was his appearance in the First Duma as government spokesman on the agrarian question. Writing of this occasion, Senator G. V. Glinka recalls: "The unsuccessful speeches of the government representatives before the noisy assembly, the feeling of bewilderment, the crushing confusion—and then V. I. Gurko’s speech. I remember his slight stature, his loud, harsh voice. Every sentence was charged with feeling, with a biting sarcasm. . . . The sweeping fire of his eloquence revealed him to be a capable parliamentary fighter. This speech proved his outstanding political genius, but at the same time it aroused great jealousy among those who sided with him and was never forgotten by his political foes."

In 1906 Gurko published his fourth book, Otryvochnyia mysli po agrarnomu voprosu ("Random Thoughts on the Agrarian Question"). In the same year his bureaucratic career ended when he was
charged with having exceeded his authority in making with a certain Lidval, who failed to carry out his agreement, a contract to supply grain to regions experiencing an acute food shortage. Gurko's political adversaries and the opposition parties in general naturally made the most of this affair; but there were many, including some of other political camps, who believed that injustice had been done. Referring to this affair, P. B. Struve later wrote: "Although I did not know Gurko personally, my conscience has long prompted me to see the injustice of this accusation. Gurko's path, it seems, somehow crossed that of P. A. Stolypin. In reality they were pursuing the same aim and were permeated with the same spirit. But their personal ways crossed and the historical flow of events carried Stolypin forward and pushed Gurko back. . . . . But fate was not just to Gurko, and the fact should be remembered that 'Stolypin's work,' aiming at a Russian peasantry strongly settled on the land, was helped by the gifted and brilliant Gurko. The historian who studies the documents will recognize the role and significance of Stolypin's land reform and of Stolypin himself and of Gurko, and lastly, of the partial realization of their program by A. V. Krivoshein. It remains to state, . . . . that from a purely historical point of view these three names should be recorded together."

Gurko's forced retirement from the government service did not end his public life. In 1909 he published Nashe gosudarsvennoe i narodnoe khoziaistvo ("Our State and People's Economy"). During this year also he returned to live on his family estate in Tver Gubernia, to begin what was in fact a new career as a member of the zemstvo. In this he faced a difficult situation. Not only was he a former bureaucrat—and all bureaucrats were regarded with suspicion by the zemstvo men—but he had been one of the most forthright critics of the policies of the Cadet party, and this party was very strong throughout the Tver zemstvo organizations. Gurko threw himself into provincial work with energy and intelligence, and so successfully overcame local and party prejudice that in 1912 his election to the Fourth State Duma was prevented only by pressure from St. Petersburg. Under this pressure he withdrew his candidacy for the Duma but was elected to the State Council. In this body Gurko, as he explains, did not join any definite party group, but with some twelve or fourteen others, chiefly former ministers of liberal or progressive views, formed a non-party group.
As representative of this group he took part in drafting the pro-
gram of the progressive bloc in 1915. In the later chapters of this
book Gurko discusses the personalities and policies of Stolypin,
Kokovtsov, Krivoshein, and their associates and describes events of
the years 1914-15 and their effect on public opinion and the
prestige of the government as he observed them.

The book ends some months before the February
Revolution. Soon after that event the State
Council disappeared from the scene
and Gurko's political life was over. After the October Revolution
he remained in Moscow, actively supporting various groups which
were attempting to organize the struggle against the Bolsheviks.
In September 1918, being obliged to leave Moscow, he went to the
Ukraine, where he continued his opposition both to the Bolsheviks
and to Ukrainian separatism. He attempted to negotiate a union
between the Volunteer Army, the Don Cossacks, and the Ukraine;
but this failed because the Volunteer Army had an Entente orienta-
tion and the Ataman of the Don Cossacks and the Ukrainian gov-
ernment looked to Germany for aid. Later Gurko attended a con-
ference of representatives of Russian anti-Bolshevik groups and
diplomatic representatives of the Entente at Jassy. This confer-
ence had very small results, and Gurko became a member of a dele-
gation sent to France and England to present the case of the Whites
to the Allied governments. This mission was equally unproductive,
and Gurko returned to Odessa. His account of these events was
published in Volume XV of Arkhiv Russkoi Revoliutsii under
the title "Iz Petrograda cherez Moskvu, Parizh, London v Odessu"
("From Petrograd through Moscow, Paris, London to Odessa").
Gurko left Russia when the French troops evacuated Odessa in
1919, but returned for a brief period to take part, on the invitation
of General Wrangel, in conferences in Sebastopol on political and
economic matters. During his last years under the difficult condi-
tions of emigrant life Gurko continued his active support of the
White cause. He died in Paris on February 18, 1927.

Gurko's contemporaries speak particularly of his intellectual
capacity and energy. Struve places him with "that brilliant type of
clever, energetic, and extraordinarily hard-working bureaucrat pro-
duced by Imperial Russia in such men as M. M. Speransky, F. F.
Konkrin, M. A. Korff, D. A. and N. A. Miliutin, and many other
notable personalities." In some respects he resembled A. V. Krivo-
shein, but Struve notes this difference: "Krivoshein possessed a sense
of proportion and the will to power which were lacking in Gurko, who was, however, more gifted and more brilliant.” Glinka, speaking of Gurko’s eloquence, adds that “this gift was enhanced by his extraordinary quickness in grasping the substance of every question, his ability to find his way out of any situation with lightning rapidity; also by the vividness of his imagination which enabled him to build plans on the widest scale. However . . . . Mr. Gurko was immune from a tendency common to many Russians: they are apt, after an impetuous impulse, to cool down very quickly and yield to the inclination to rest after every strenuous effort. Fatigue and overstrain seemed to be unknown to him. His store of energy was inexhaustible. He was as incapable of living without intellectual activity as a fish without water.”

The reader of this book can scarcely fail to gain a very clear impression of the author’s personality. His judgments of men and events, which are often severe, reflect that personality; they reveal prejudices and predilections, but they are the judgments of a keen and vigorous mind.

In respect to certain matters discussed by Mr. Gurko we have thought it might be useful to include excerpts from the memoirs of some of his contemporaries who were themselves concerned with these events. These excerpts from the writings of D. N. Shipov and A. I. Guchkov, as translated by Mrs. Joukoff, are given in the Appendix. The extract from Mr. Guchkov’s memoirs is published with the kind permission of his executors, Messrs. Boris Elkin and V. A. Maklakov. In the Appendix and in Gurko’s text, the respective authors’ interpolations are enclosed in parentheses, while square brackets indicate in every case interpolations by the present editors.

Mrs. Joukoff, Mr. Sterling, and I are under deep obligation to Madame Gurko for the invaluable help she has so courteously and patiently given us in the preparation of this book. We wish to acknowledge our obligation also to Mrs. Gay Dimick Taylor, who has prepared the manuscript for the press and aided us in many other ways. The index has been prepared by Mrs. Taylor and Mr. Paul L. Hanna.

H. H. Fisher

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November 5, 1937
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