First Ladies
The province of Siberia, 19th century

The second most important person of West Siberia after her husband. A contemporary about the general governor’s wife

In Western Europe and in America, the so-called women’s studies formed into a separate branch of knowledge as far back as in the late 1960s — early 1970s. Today, looking at a historical epoch with women’s eyes will not surprise anyone. Having freed itself from radical feminism, so characteristic of women’s studies at the outset, this branch of learning has been progressing quickly, and you can see it on the curricula of hundreds of educational institutions. In Russian historic literature, “women’s theme” has been present for over 200 years, but in the last two decades these investigations have witnessed a real boom (Pushkareva, 2002).

A distinguishing feature of Soviet historiography was that for many years the women’s question was considered in the context of women’s emancipation, which not only reflected the objective reality but, above all, met the ideological and political requirements of the time. On the other hand, many works dwelt on associated subjects — women’s legal and economic status, their role in the family, the possibility of their professional education and carriers, and the government’s policy — in a word, on everything that has become the subject of today’s women’s studies. Also, there are a number of demographic, sociological, and literary studies dealing with the life of Siberian women in the 19th century (Goncharov, 2004).

The market economy that rushed into our life in the early 1990s ruined a lot of national stereotypes. In the first place, these changes affected our values including the ideas of women’s role in the family and in the society. However, the juxtaposition of modern, intrinsic to the globalization epoch, and traditional models of women’s behavior, so typical of our days, partly derives from complete ignorance of the national historical background.

The History of First Ladies in Memoirs

The 19th century Russia and Siberia had a few bright, independent and dynamic personalities, in particular, wives of heads of local administration, governors and general-governors (a general-governor was in charge of a vast region consisting of a few provinces, like East or West Siberia). Women began to participate in social life long before the end of the 19th century, when women’s emancipation, first in vogue with the intelligentsia, spread precipitately to the aristocratic circles of the Russian society.

Regrettably, the historic evidence of everyday lives of these women, wives of high-ranking officers, of their responsibilities and relationship with their husbands is scarce. The reason is trivial: in the “men’s society” of our ancestors, women’s life and activities were not supposed important, even though throughout most of the 18th century Russia was ruled by empresses.

Most valuable in this respect are memoirs: they contain lively stories about the past and can convey the atmosphere of the years gone by better than any other source. Memoirs are irreplaceable if you need to get an insight into the people’s frame of mind, morals and psychology — in general, when you turn to the human component of any historical process.

Memoirs written by the Russian women of the 19th century are very few. According to our estimate, out of 3,585 diaries and memoirs known today and referring to the years 1801–1856 of Russian history, only 248, i.e. less than 7%, were written or dictated by women. Among Russian women autobiographers there were some citizens of Siberia.
And yet, the life of women belonging to the top circle of Siberian military and civil administration can be reconstructed primarily on the basis of memoirs belonging to men—their husbands, relatives and friends. The biographers who wrote about women paid special attention to the wives of high-ranking officers—and there was another reason for it, apart from the predictable interest in the life of big houses, namely, the exclusive position these women held in the society.

### The Lady of the “Big House”

Governors were transferred to Siberia from the European part of Russia on the Tsar’s order. Their average term of service in the same place was four years (from a year to 15 years), and their families had to move often. And each time, the women had to adapt to the new climate and new way of life, new environment and sometimes to new responsibilities.

For instance, the General-Governor of West Siberia A. O. Dougamel recollected that when he was sent as an envoy to Persia, his wife mastered the Persian language and made friends with the wives of Persian dignitaries, including the Shah’s first wife, and got invited, together with her spouse, to see the Shah himself. However, after a few years of diplomatic service and then of quiet life in St. Petersburg in the Senator’s position, her husband was appointed General-Governor and sent to the far-away Siberia. One can only guess how different living conditions were in these diametrically opposite points of the globe: Persia, St. Petersburg and Siberia!

Officers of high ranks who served in Irkutsk, Tobolsk, Tomsk, and Omsk had at their disposal special-purpose houses or were paid “accommodation” money. With rare exceptions, the governors’ houses were roomy and comfortable: they had a ball room and a spacious drawing room for giving receptions, grand dinners and balls, the governor’s study and reception room; and rooms for his closest associates (general-governor’s adjutants and special-duty officers) even lived in the same house, as shows the plan of a part of the house of East Siberia’s General-Governor N. N. Muraviev, drawn by his close associate M. S. Korsakov in his letter to the parents). In addition, the house had a bedroom, wife’s boudoir, her personal drawing room, dining room, children’s rooms and rooms for the servants. Household buildings were placed in the yard.

Palaces of the general-governors of East and West Siberia have survived to this day. In Irkutsk, it is the so-called “White House” on the bank of the Angara River, now home to Irkutsk University’s Academic Library. In Omsk, it is the building of the Vrubel Art Museum of the Omsk oblast.

Officers’ houses in the remote parts of Siberia looked very different. For example, stoves of the governor’s house based in Chita were made in the way so it was impossible to keep the house warm in winter. In Blagoveshchensk and in Nikolaevsk-on-the-Amur, centers of the Amur oblast and of the Primorie oblast, respectively, the governors’ houses were erected simultaneously with the cities’ infrastructure. This is what a memoirist wrote about the early days of Nikolaevsk: “The city was built on a site covered with dense forest, and all the streets of the city (except the main one) were lined with tree-stumps, witty sailor nicknamed the city “Saint-Germain-des-Pues” (‘pen’ is the Russian for a tree-stump).”

### To Feed and To Warm

It was not easy to find good servants either; Siberia lacked for skillful housemaids, cooks, footmen, and valets. Sometimes, the governors brought their servants along with them, but this practice stopped when servitude was abolished. As a rule, it was the women who were charged with the complicated task of hiring servants, and they had to take risks.

The daughter of Tobolsk Governor D. M. Frantseva wrote, “We chose our servants from the convicts. They were then registered as residents of the city, which they valued highly” (Frantseva, 1888). Some of the convicts were real criminals; others were serfs punished for offences against their masters. The servants’ duties went beyond looking after the family. Top officers often invited a large number of their subordinates for dinner. In Irkutsk, the General-Governor used to treat at least ten people daily, that is, on week days.

Minsk district police officer A. K. Koznin remarked about the Yenisey Governor V. I. Koplyov, who was reputed to be greedy: “Everyone has the right to privacy when he is at home; but the governor, even at home, cannot enjoy his private life because he gets money for meals.” In far-away regions, this practice was dictated not by the etiquette alone—dinners in a boss’s home were the only way for young unmarried officers to have regular and wealthy meals.

The wives of Kamchatka’s heads L. I. Rikord and Y. E. Zavoiko, and the wife of the head of the Amur Expedition E. I. Nevelskaya are known to have taken care of health, education and nourishment of junior officers, apart from their own families.

Yulia Egorovna, the wife of the first governor of Kamchatka V. I. Zavoiko, the daughter of a St. Petersburg professor and niece of the famous travel writer Baron F. P. Vrangel, recollected that about 30 military and civil officers would get together in the dining room—otherwise many of them would be starving. Yulia Egorovna had ten children; the family had to run a farm so as to feed not only themselves but also the governor’s associates. The life of this outstanding woman was, at times, dramatic. During the Crimean war, a year after the heroic defense of Petropavlovsk-Kamchatky in 1854, Kamchatka’s population, including the governor’s family, was precipitately evacuated. In Nikolaevsyk, where they managed to bring only one cow, Y. E. Zavoiko, crying bitterly, had to divide a liter of milk between her ten children. Her memoirs written 30 years later reflect some of her bitter worries (Zavoiko, 1878).

### Children’s Education

Back in those times, women’s life was marred with a high rate of children’s mortality. Medicine was helpless in front of many diseases which have been overcome nowadays. In Siberia, lack for qualified doctors was especially acute. In fact, the general-governor had to invite to his home a state criminal, a Decembrist in exile. F. B. Wolf.

Organizing children’s education was also a problem. In the first half of the 19th century there were only two gymnasias for boys: in Tobolsk and in Irkutsk; in 1868 another one opened in Krasnoyarsk, and in 1845 the East Siberian Institute for Girls was started. Highly-ranked officers did not often send their children to these establishments: sons were usually educated at cadet corps in Central Russia (for instance, the son of General-Governor V. Ya. Rupert attended the elite Pudeshsky Corps), and daughters went to privileged institutes for noble girls located in the capitals, St. Petersburg and Moscow. Up to the age of 11 or 12, the children, even boys, were educated at home.
In a Vortex of High Life

Governess’ spouses had another primary duty: to manage the life of high society; that is, to hold balls, receptions, music concerts, and formal dinner-parties, in which guest-performers from Moscow and St Petersburg often participated.

The wife of the first governor of the Amur oblast Ekaterina Matveevna Bonch, a graduate of the East Siberian Institute for Girls and an ardent music-lover, managed to turn her home into a center of social and cultural life. Apart from receptions and dinners, she organized amateur performances and parties with dances, “live pictures”, and reading aloud — which meant that the governor’s house (which he prolonged to the government) had to be “very beautiful, large and with various amusements”, which included a winter garden and a spacious summer-house twined with ivy. Lots of attributes of civilized life had to be ordered from Russia and from abroad.

Governor N. V. Bousse complained to General-Governor M. S. Korsakov, “There is neither a piano nor a grand piano in Blagoveschensk <...> The wife is aggrieved”, and asked to purchase the instrument with the government’s money “as this was done in Chita and in Yakutsk” (archive 137, Manuscript Department, Russian State Library). This kind of activity required a lot of time and efforts. Applying for a permission to go to Irkutsk for a short holiday, Bousse wrote to Korsakov that his wife was tired of “colossal household activities she was not accustomed to, horrible servants”, reception days and dinners.

Girls from noble families had been taught to be hostesses and centers of high life since early childhood, but not all the high society ladies managed to get command of this skill. For instance, the wife of West Siberia’s General-Governor Natalia Dmitrievna Gorchakova was “a reticent woman; she was near-sighted and felt embarrassed to see a new picture in Blagoveschensk” (Frantsve, 1888, p. 391). The young lady coming from the capital did her best to avoid this shocking local practice. Thirty years later, in 1848, a young graduate of the Alexanderovsky Lyceum, B. V. Struve, was passing through West Siberia. He left evidence of the astonishing behavior of West Siberia’s General-Governor Prince P. D. Gorochakov at a ball. Willing “to show attention to a girl or a lady, he would do a turn of waltz with her and then, as though throwing her out of his arms to his aide, would say, ‘There you go! Give her a whirl around.”’ (By the way, twelve years later the Struve family had the son Peter who subsequently became an active member of the cadet party and founder of the famous dynasty of public figures and publishers.)

Social Life and Charity

Reforms of the 1860s brought radical changes to the life of this country and, among other things, affected women’s participation in social life. In the 1850s—1860s, prison committees and charity societies taking care of the poor, invalids, orphans and elderly people sprang up in the central cities of gubernias (provinces).

Each of these associations had a women’s department normally managed by wives of local administration heads. Also, these ladies were often guardians of girls’ gymnasia and schools, orphanages and other charity establishments. Their duties included regular fund-raising for the benefit of their charges, personnel recruitment and similar responsibilities. This work was done in co-operation with governmental bodies: school boards, charity ministries, exile expeditions and construction commissions of gubernia departments.

Anna Mikhailovna Artsimovich, the wife of Tobolsk Governor, was known to manage the organization, by the Tobolsk Guardian Prison Committee, of seamstresses’ courses in the women’s transit prison.

In Omsk, they tell still stories about the young and charming wife of West Siberia’s General-Governor G. Kh. Gasford Lubov Fedorovna, who impressed everyone with her kindliness and sympathy. In 1851, M. S. Korsakov wrote to his relations, “the Lubinka Lyova you know is getting married and will be the most important person in West Siberia after her husband.”

Gustav Christianovich Gasford, who was much older than his wife, brought her along with him on his rounds of “tours based in the steppe” or on visits to the “boundary Cossack settlements”. The legendary image of the Governor’s young wife — she died very early — was reflected in the Lubinsky prospect (now Lenin street) and Lubinsky Garden were named in her honor.

The wife of the Cis-Amur General-Governor Varvara Fedorovna Dukhovskaya (née Princess Golitsina) was brought up in St Petersburg high society. In her memoirs, she dwelt on her activities in the charity society; drama circle, music society, women’s school (future pregymnasia), public library, public readings, and girls’ orphanage, to name just a few.

Friend and Wife

The governors’ spouses played an important role not only in the social, cultural and charity activities of their husbands. Also, they were mothers of honor at the weddings of their husbands’ subordinates and godmothers of their children. Civil and military officers had to apply to their boss for approval before getting married. Such approval was only granted with the spouse’s consent.

Sometimes the moral qualities of the “first lady” governed the official behavior of her husband and the ways and manners of his close associates. The wives of high-ranking officers took part in the discussion of many subjects concerning government.

S. I. Cheparenov left the following evidence about the wife of N. I. Treskin, the governor of Irkutsk in 1806—1819: “Treskin’s wife was in charge of all the activities of her husband. Having hired such people as head of police Loskotov...
and heads of the Governor’s chancellery, she set the task of collecting a pud (c. 16 kilograms) of banknotes for each of her eight children” (Excerpts from the memoirs by S. I. Cherepanov, 1876, p. 73). It should be noted, to be fair, that the governor’s reputation, though compromised (which was mainly because of his domineering and greedy wife), was not completely tainted — modern investigators give him credit for improving the city and developing the economy of the gubernia.

The wife of Yakutsk Governor Y. I. Schtubendorf, Adelaida Karlovna, was made notorious by the well-known artist N. A. Stepanov, so the governor had to apply for retirement: the satirical magazine Iskra published a caricature depicting extortion of furs from the Yakuts by the governor’s wife.

This portrait was published in 1987 in the album Watercolor and Pencil Portraits of 18th—19th cc. in the museums of Russia and signed “L. F. Tasford”. P. P. Vibe managed to attribute this portrait of Lubov Feodorovna Gasford kept in the Museum, where it had been brought from her sister’s estate (Vibe, Dziubanov, 2004, pp. 54—55). This is the first time the wife of West Siberia’s General-Governor G. Kh. Gasford is presented to the readers under her real name.

However, not all the first ladies had such wicked bents. For instance, nobody dared even to mention giving a present to Elena Vilhelmovna, the wife of Yenisei Governor V. K. Padalka (she was the daughter of East Siberia’s General-Governor V. Ya. Roupert). The only person who managed to get round her strictness was Nikolay Miasnikov, the famous Siberian owner of a gold-mine, who gave her, as a souvenir, bast sandals made from gold (Excerpts from memoirs by S. I. Cherepanov, 1876, p. 79).

Memoirs contain a lot of testimony that not only the wives but mistresses of top officers interfered with their service functions. This is what M. D. Frantseva wrote about A. R. Shramm, a general’s wife, who exerted a strong influence over West Siberia’s General-Governor P. D. Gorchakov after the departure of his wife: “The governing of the region...
The wives of Siberian top officials often accompanied their husbands during perilous expeditions and dangerous journeys through unexplored Siberian lands.

The French Siberian

Back in the 19th century, one of the duties of top officers was frequent journeys through Siberia’s vast expanse. Some of the first ladies were very enthusiastic about traveling. In the first place, we should mention Ekaterina Nikolaevna Muravieva and Lidia Konstantinovna Poltoratskaya, who were broadminded, well educated, curious, and courageous.

The wife of N.N. Muraviev-Amursky, General-Governor of East Siberia in 1847–1861, was born in France and belonged to the ancient aristocratic family de Richemond from Lorraine. She met her future husband during his trip abroad. The wedding was held on January 19, 1847 in the city of Bogoroditsk, Tula gubernia, where Muraviev was the governor. Before getting married, the young Frenchwoman adopted Orthodox Christianity and became Ekaterina Nikolaevna. A year later she followed her husband to Siberia, a remote and completely unfamiliar land.

The wives of Nikolay Muraviev, who played an important role in the history of Siberia and Russia, helped her husband in all his deeds. It was mostly thanks to the initiative and perseverance of this outstanding statesman that the huge Amur krai (region) became part of the Russian Empire and the present boundary with China was established, which earned Muraviev the title of a count and the honorary post-fix of Amursky to his name in 1858. Today, in Khabarovsk, you can see a statue of Muraviev-Amursky made by the sculptor A.M. Opekushin (this monument is depicted in the Russian five-thousand-ruble note).

Ekaterina Nikolaevna had to live in Irkutsk, in the general-governor’s palace, and to run the huge house. They also had a greenhouse, which was “very good and was kept very clean”. M.S. Korsakov devoted a few pages of his diary to its description: “The ivy twines beautifully over the walls. There are some trees: quite a big fig tree, and a lemon tree with a ripe lemon in it, grape vines, roses, carnations, mimosa, jasmine, and others.” In a letter to his relations, Korsakov also mentioned that “next to the house, Nikolay Nikolaievich has a small garden he planted himself, with raspberries and other berries”, and the greenhouse had some pineapple trees. In this garden, “they kept a wild goat and a hare”. All this was not too exotic for Irkutsk: the city had long been famous for the huge greenhouse belonging to the educated merchant V.N. Basnin. And yet, keeping such a luxurious house required a lot of energy and attention. Nevertheless, the interests of the governor’s young wife went beyond her household duties.

The French Siberian...
Lady Traveler and Photographer

The second half of the 19th century in Russia, including Siberia, was marked by social changes. A bright emancipated representative of that time was the wife of the Semipalatinsk military governor, Lidia Konstantinovna Poltaratskaya, the daughter of the well-known man of letters K. P. Masalsky.

Poltaratskaya accompanied her husband in his travels through the unexplored and little-known places of the Altai. Up in the mountains, she had to ride a horse in a man's saddle, wear a headdress (a quilted Tatar semi-caftan, or a man's long tight-fitting tunic worn underneath a caftan) and chemise (wide trousers worn over a sheepskin coat, whose flaps are stuck into the chemise). For festivals and celebrations she changed from her Tatar man's outfit into her “Tatar woman's dress” (Poltaratskaya, 1871, p. 558).

Once, they happened to be alone with her ten-year-old son on mountainous scree. “My Goodness, it was more than likely that I would slip down, and above all, my dear Kostya, recollected Poltaratskaya. There was nothing I could do to help him, I only ordered him not to stop. [...] If, a few minutes before that, I had been sentenced to death for having exposed a child to such danger, I wouldn’t have uttered a word in protest” (Poltaratskaya, 1871, p. 598).

In the late 1870s, Lidia Konstantinovna, together with her husband and two children, accompanied the German exploratory expedition, one of whose members was the famous naturalist Alfred Brehm. Her notes show that she was skilled in batte hunting, with which they entertained the reputed travelers. Without any complaints, she enumerated the difficulties and hardships they had survived and even stated that that journey was among the most pleasant in her life.

Poltaratskaya was carried away with photography, and must have been the first woman-photographer in Siberia. Cameras convenient for trips appeared some time later; in those days “the cameras and supports were very cumbersome; glass plates (there were no films yet) were difficult to transport because of their size and weight. One had to take along a bottle with liquid collodion and other solutions. Despite numerous limitations of landscape photography — it was impossible to combine foreground and background to photograph when it was windy (the exposure lasted a minute or a minute and a half), greenery looked like a homogeneous dark spot, etc., — the pictures made by L. K. Poltaratskaya "were technically good. [...] She took into consideration the location of separate groups of plants and outlines of mountains, hills, and glaciers. She tried "to lift" the skyline, which improved the picture’s composition” (Murov, 1961, p. 48).

The photographs she had taken during her journeys made part of The Album of West Siberian Types and Species, which contained over 50 depictions of Altai landscapes and its inhabitants; their everyday life and appearance. For this album, Poltaratskaya “was awarded the large silver medal at the Moscow anthropological exhibition of 1879” and was made “a member — organizer of the newly established "Photography Department of the Russian Technical Society” (Murov, 1961, pp. 33-35).

A having learnt some things about the life of the “first ladies” of the Siberian province of the 19th century, we can realize that the status of a spouse of a high-ranking dignitary set the woman a certain model of behavior. Despite those bounds, however, she could reveal her personality, her nature, her talents and interests: among the wives of top officers of the Russian Empire you can find skillful managers and high society ladies, benefactresses and patrons of the arts, artists and choir-takers, new mothers to their own children and to their husbands’ subordinates, and participants of dangerous expeditions. It is more than likely that future researchers of women’s studies will repeat after us the following words: Em di tus smar. Satallinemum is it?