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Published in the USA
Zhurnal ministerstva narodnogo prosveshcheniya
Issued since 2014.
E-ISSN: 2413-7294
2025. 12(1): 52-58

DOI: 10.13187/zhmnp.2025.1.52
<https://zmnp.cherkasgu.press>



A Biographical Portrait of A.S. Norov, Russian Education Minister from 1853 to 1858: A Tribute on the 230th Anniversary of His Birth

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Abstract

This biographical study commemorates the 230th anniversary of the birth of Avraam Sergeyevich Norov, a traveler, man of letters, holder of the rank of Active Privy Councilor, and Russian Army colonel, who served as the Russian Empire's Education Minister from 1853 to 1858.

The materials for the study were A.S. Norov's own works and a body of biographical research addressing his scholarly and creative work. In terms of methodology, use was made of the biographical, historiographical, classification, and synthesis methods.

The study's findings revealed that A.S. Norov was a well-rounded individual who successfully worked in various domains of societal life, combining military and civil service duties to serve his country. He combined research and administrative work with literary and publicistic writing, and with acts of heroism on the battlefield. His personal qualities contributed to his elevation to high ranks in civil service and science.

While there appears to be a general concurrence of opinion about him on the part of his critics, that is not the case with what his contemporaries thought about him, A.S. Norov combining conflicting characteristics – kindness, integrity, innovativeness, boldness in judgement, erudition, patriotism, religiousness, diplomacy, and humanism with careerism, servility before higher rank, unwillingness to stand his ground, weak organizational and managerial skills, absent-mindedness and forgetfulness, hypocrisy, and emotional instability.

With that said, as the country's Education Minister, A.S. Norov, while considered by many as a reactionary official, did seek to reduce censorship, boost the autonomy of higher education institutions, and provide equal opportunity in education to all children, regardless of gender or social status.

As a scholar, A.S. Norov was especially noted for his innovative ideas, his abilities to develop deep insight into the subject of study and beautifully convey his ideas in writing, and his prolific output – dozens of fundamental works and articles on history, culturology, geography, religious studies, and other disciplines. He was also distinguished by his generosity and patriotism – he is known to have used his own funds to purchase artifacts and contribute them to Russian museums, and also to have engaged in conserving cultural assets to help insure against the possibility of their being lost in history (e.g., copying frescoes in church catacombs in the city of Alexandria).

Keywords: Avraam Sergeyevich Norov, Minister of Education, Russian Empire, education system of the Russian Empire

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1. Introduction

Avraam Sergeyevich Norov (1795–1869) holds a special place in Russian history, and that is, above all, owing to his all-round talents.

A hero of the Patriotic War of 1812, who achieved the rank of Colonel, an outstanding diplomat, a publicist and writer, a traveler, a full member of the Imperial Saint Petersburg Academy of Sciences, who in the latter years of his life became the country's Education Minister and was granted the civil rank of Active Privy Councilor (second highest in the Table of Ranks) – these are just some of his accomplishments in serving his country.

The present work, which commemorates the 230th anniversary of A.S. Norov's birth, represents a brief biographical account of his life.

2. Materials and methods

The materials for the study were as follows:

1) A.S. Norov's own works (Norov, 1828; Norov, 1838; Norov, 1840; Norov, 1847; Norov, 1854; Norov, 2005; Norov, 2012);

2) biographical research on A.S. Norov (Chistikova, 2016; Gavrilov, 2021; Shilov, 2013; Ablyazov, 2018; Levin, 2021; Sachkova, 2012; Sachkova, 2013; Kertanova, 2020; Kertanova, Sachkova, 2019; Konstantinova, 2022; Vzdornov, 2015; Vakh, 2019a; Vakh, 2019b; Vakh, 2021; Burov, 2014).

In terms of methodology, use was made of the following methods: biographical, historiographical, classification, and synthesis.

The study leaned on key historical research principles such as historicism, objectivity, comprehensiveness, and systematicity.

3. Discussion

The scholarly works on A.S. Norov are quite numerous. However, the scope of this article not permitting an extensive historiographical survey necessitates excluding both the research by prerevolutionary and Soviet historians and a large portion of the contemporary research. Consequently, the present work's brief historiographical survey will be limited to only the publications drawn upon in conducting this study.

The literature can be divided into three distinct categories based on subject matter: 1) biographical works on A.S. Norov; 2) works covering the work of A.S. Norov as Education Minister; 3) research addressing A.S. Norov's diplomatic, social, and literary activity.

In the first category, of particular note is the fundamental study by Ye.A. Chistikova, 'A.S. Norov's Administrative and Social Activity' (Chistikova, 2016), which explores his work as an official and publicist and overall provides a fairly detailed biographical account of his life.

There are quite many articles focusing on A.S. Norov in encyclopedic publications, of which particular mention should be made of those by A.K. Gavrilov (Gavrilov, 2021) and D.N. Shilov (Shilov, 2013).

In the second category, of particular interest are the works by K.A. Ablyazov (Ablyazov, 2018), S.V. Levin (Levin, 2021), and G.S. Sachkova (Sachkova, 2012; Sachkova, 2013). The worldview and morals of A.S. Norov as the nation's Education Minister are discussed in the work by N.D. Konstantinova (Konstantinova, 2022).

The body of literature in the third category is the largest among the three examined here. Worthy of special mention here is the fundamental study by G.I. Vzdornov, produced as part of a research project supported by a grant from the Russian Foundation for the Humanities, which provides a biographical account of A.S. Norov's life and details his diplomatic work in the Middle East (Vzdornov, 2015).

A.S. Norov's ecclesiastical-diplomatic work is discussed in the works by K.A. Vakh (Vakh, 2019a; Vakh, 2019b; Vakh, 2021) and A.A. Burov (Burov, 2014), among others.

His literary work is covered in the publications by V.V. Kertanova and G.S. Sachkova (Kertanova, 2020; Kertanova, Sachkova, 2019), among others.

4. Results

A.S. Norov (Figure 1) was born in Saratov Governorate into the family of a military retiree, which would largely set the tone for the initial stage of his career. Two of his brothers became famous, too – Vasily as a Decembrist and Alexander as a poet.

As was traditional amongst the Russian nobility at the time, A.S. Norov first received a home education. Afterwards, he attended the Moscow University Noble Boarding School. In 1810, he joined the Leib-Guard Artillery Brigade as a junker, and as early as 1811 he received the rank of Warrant Officer.

An active participant in the Patriotic War of 1812, A.S. Norov lost his left leg in the Battle of Borodino. However, despite his bodily misfortune hampering his military career, he did not quit and continued to climb the career ladder – using, among other things, his extraordinary linguistic ability. According to K.A. Ablyazov, “during the course of his treatment, A.S. Norov was actively engaged in self-education – he studied history and literature; to add to his superb command of French and German, he also became proficient in Latin, Ancient Greek, English, Italian, and Spanish” (Ablyazov, 2018: 79). Eventually, he ceased military service in 1823, retiring in the rank of Colonel.



Fig. 1. Avraam Sergeyevich Norov (1795–1869)

Despite being close to the Freemasons and Decembrists, A.S. Norov did not join either of those groups. He was a true Russian patriot and his interest was not in regime change but in literature and publicistic writing – another area where he achieved significant success, becoming a member of the Free Society of Lovers of Philology, Science, and the Arts and an honorary member of the Society of Lovers of Russian Philology (Ablyazov, 2018: 79).

However, the pursuit of career growth would bring him back to service – this time, it was civil service. He would become Special Duties Officer at the Ministry of Internal Affairs in 1827, Secretary of the Commission for Petitions in 1830, a member of the Senate in 1849, Deputy Minister of National Education in 1850, and, finally, Minister of National Education in 1853 – thus reaching the pinnacle of his career.

A.S. Norov’s contemporaries generally regarded him as “lettered, soft, feeble, and weak-willed” (Sachkova, 2012: 65); (to use the words of historian M.K. Lemke) “a mild and humane person, who knew quite a lot – but, just like all the Education Ministers the country had between 1816 and 1858, did not possess a very broad and deep education and was not particularly bright” (Sachkova, 2012: 65-66); “a good man of letters and scholar and a lousy administrator” (Sachkova, 2012: 66). According to the renowned Russian writer A.P. Chekhov, “A.S. Norov was well-respected as a person. He was generally regarded as good-natured, down-to-earth, sociable, and kind – but no good as a minister” (as cited in Sachkova, 2013: 20). This characterization must have been associated with the fact that A.S. Norov was wholly loyal to the then-existing government and

staunchly supported the reactionary policy of Nicholas I, which reached a culmination following the suppression of the Revolutions of 1848 in the Austrian Empire; it is during that “rampage of reaction” period that A.S. Norov got to head up the Ministry.

At the same time, it would be remiss to overlook A.S. Norov’s military exploits and his career, literary, and scholarly achievements. Based on the findings of a contemporary study, “A.S. Norov was a highly educated scholar; at the same time, he was deeply religious, a devout Christian, which was the governing factor that set the tone for his scholarly pursuits. He harmoniously combined secular science and fundamental knowledge in a variety of humanities disciplines with religious commitment, and that never precluded him from creating great scholarly and literary works – it actually made his works more relevant and interesting for both researchers and the reading audience” (Kertanova, Sachkova, 2019: 13).

A.S. Norov succeeded in considerably improving the country’s higher education both in breadth (student numbers growing significantly during his tenure) and in depth (new disciplines being introduced (most notably, new language courses) and foreign student exchange programs being reinstated). He is also known to have made attempts to reduce censorship.

As a member of the State Council, A.S. Norov actively advocated for the creation of a university in Siberia. Despite the fact that his initiative was not taken up by Alexander II, the reach of higher education across the Siberian region would later take on a significant scale. In fact, today the level of Siberian institutions of higher learning (especially, those in the technical domain) is among the highest in the nation.

In addition, it is owing to A.S. Norov that there appeared in the Russian Empire its first public women’s schools, enabling females to receive free education alongside males (Shilov, 2013: 336).

A.S. Norov’s accomplishments did not go unnoticed and in 1856 he was granted the rank of Active Privy Councilor (second highest in the Table of Ranks), which was equal to those of Major-General in the Army and Rear Admiral in the Navy.

His scholarly and literary pursuits were rewarded as well: in 1840 he became a member of the Russian Academy, and in 1851 he was made a full member of the Imperial Saint Petersburg Academy of Sciences, the nation’s most prestigious academic institution at the time.

A.S. Norov was actively involved in charity work. For instance, his donations helped rebuild a church within the Coastal Monastery of St. Sergius in Saint Petersburg.

A.S. Norov was on a friendly footing with the poet A.S. Pushkin and contributed to the creative making of the philosopher T.N. Granovsky and the historian S.M. Soloviev, among others.

As far as A.S. Norov’s literary legacy, this hero of the Patriotic War of 1812 was distinguished by high levels of activity as a publicist, leaving behind several dozen works (including fundamental ones), some of which were even reprinted in the 21st century.

A.S. Norov’s own works can be divided into two distinct groups: 1) works describing his travels, his geographical activity, and his diplomatic activity; 2) his translations and publicistic pieces.

The first group contains the largest number of his works and it is this category that gained him nationwide recognition and propelled him to become a full member of the Imperial Saint Petersburg Academy of Sciences.

Chronologically, A.S. Norov’s first fundamental work was ‘A Journey in Sicily, 1822’ (Norov, 1828), published in the capital in 1828. Based on the research-driven travels in Europe he undertook in 1822, it describes the island’s natural-climatic and geographical features, its residents’ ethnic characteristics, and certain elements of its industrial and economic development. G.S. Sachkova characterizes the publication as “a valuable historical-geographical source, in which the author’s first-hand observations and personal impressions are tightly interwoven with historical and literary associations” (Sachkova, 2013: 18).

However, in the early 1830s A.S. Norov’s focus switched to the Middle East and North Africa.

In 1834–1835, he explored the geography of Egypt, Nubia, and Palestine, which resulted in the publication of two monographs: ‘A Journey in the Holy Land, 1835’ (Norov, 1838) and ‘A Journey in Egypt and Nubia, 1834–1835’ (Norov, 1840), published in two parts and reprinted in 2012 (Norov, 2012). In 1847, A.S. Norov produced another monograph, ‘A Journey to the Seven Churches of the Apocalypse’ (Norov, 1847), based on his travels to Laodicea, Philadelphia, Sardis, Thyatira, Smyrna, Pergamum, and Ephesus undertaken in the early 1840s. The monograph was reprinted in 2005 (Norov, 2005).

In the above-mentioned works, the author not only provides a thorough analysis and description of the regions' natural-climatic, economic, industrial, civil engineering, ethnic, and linguistic characteristics but also shares a number of arguably groundbreaking findings – like, for instance, this one respecting the Egyptian pyramids: “These giant structures bear no impress of Egyptian architecture proper – they are but an imitation of the world's earliest primitive monuments, such as the Tower of Babel or the Tower of Belus” (Norov, 1847: 143-144), alternatively suggesting them to be “outlandish” in origin and not have been built by ancient Egyptians.

His later works, specifically his monographs ‘Defending the Sinai Bible from Attacks by Bishop Porphyrius’ (Norov, 1863) and ‘Abbot Daniel's Early-12th-Century Journey in the Holy Land, 1113–1115’ (Norov, 1864) and his article ‘Jerusalem and Mount Sinai: Notes of the Second Journey in the Middle East’ (Norov, 1878), published after the death of his father, reveal A.S. Norov as a talented historian, meticulously exploring religious medievalism in the activity of certain Christian figures, such as Abbot Daniel and Bishop Porphyrius. He brought back many different artifacts from his travels in the Holy Land, some of which (e.g., the statue of Goddess Sekhmet-Mut (15th century BC)) are held in Russian museums. Also, he is known to have copied frescoes in church catacombs in Alexandria for preservation purposes. As relevantly pointed out by G.S. Sachkova, “Norov was one of the first explorers of the Middle East to warn of the potential risk of religious conflicts breaking out in the region and urge bonding among different faiths” (Sachkova, 2013: 21).

A.S. Norov's oeuvre also includes some material concerned with the search for and analysis of information on lost civilizations – e.g., his monograph ‘Studies on Atlantis’ (Norov, 1854).

The last work produced by A.S. Norov to be printed while he was alive was the article ‘War and Peace (1805–1812). From a Historical Viewpoint and Based on the Reminiscences of a Contemporary. In Relation to the Work ‘War and Peace’ by Count L.N. Tolstoy’, published in *Voennyi Sbornik* in 1868 (Norov, 1868). In the article, with characteristic diplomacy and uncharacteristic harshness, A.S. Norov subjects what will go on to become a bestseller to criticism, laying stress on some historical inconsistencies in the novel and then voicing his hurt patriotic feelings of a veteran and former participant in the war.

In the context of the second group of works by A.S. Norov, it is worth remembering that he was a pretty good linguist. His most famous translation is ‘An Excerpt from Canto 3 of the ‘Inferno’ (Norov, 1823), published in the journal *Syn Otechestva*.

Among A.S. Norov's publicistic pieces, of particular interest is the article ‘How Can I Ever Forget You, Blissful Taurida’ (Norov, 1831), published in *Odessky Almanakh* in 1831, in which he describes the natural-climatic characteristics of Crimea and certain areas in the north-eastern part of the Black Sea region.

A.S. Norov passed away in 1869 at the age of 73. He was buried in the Coastal Monastery of St. Sergius, which, as we know, he had helped renovate.

5. Conclusion

Below are the conclusions of this study.

1. A.S. Norov was a well-rounded individual who successfully combined his military service with civil service and his research and administrative work with literary and publicistic writing. He was a top student. He was not immune to careerism and would attain the rank of Active Privy Councilor, become a member of the Russian Academy and a full member of the Imperial Saint Petersburg Academy of Sciences, and retire at a relatively young age in the rank of Colonel in the Russian Imperial Army. A hero of the Patriotic War of 1812, A.S. Norov lost his left leg in the Battle of Borodino. Throughout his life, he was an extremely proactive and efficient person and not just traveled but put pen to paper about his travel observations – and even went as far as personally purchasing all kinds of rare artifacts and contributing them to museums.

2. While there appears to be a general concurrence of opinion about him on the part of his critics, that is not the case with what his contemporaries thought about him. According to both celebrated (e.g., T.N. Granovsky, S.M. Soloviev, and A.P. Chekhov) and lesser-known individuals, A.S. Norov was good-natured, unselfish, innovative, and bold (both in action and in judgment), erudite, extraordinarily gifted in literary talent, patriotic, religious, and diplomatic, and also had an ability to see the best in people and identify the innate talents in them. His negative characteristics included being excessively careerist and servile before higher rank, having weak organizational and

managerial skills (something definitely at odds with his high offices), being absent-minded and forgetful, too willing to please others (even individuals in hostile groups – slipping, at times, into hypocrisy), and emotionally unstable (given to frequent changes of mood and forgetful of promises he made).

3. By his contemporaries' accounts, as Minister of National Education A.S. Norov left an ambivalent impression: on one hand, he was staunchly committed to implementing the reactionary policy of Nicholas I, and on the other – he put in efforts to combat censorship, advocated for some autonomy for institutions of higher learning, had progressive views respecting education, and put initiatives of this kind in practice (e.g., the launch of public women's schools, enabling females to receive free education alongside males). And, while his contemporaries reproached him as lacking willpower and having weak administrative skills, most of the modern historians are of the view that on many of the occasions he acted the way he did because of special circumstances, adding to that his drive to implement innovative, progressive initiatives in education.

4. A.S. Norov was an energetic person who captured the observations from his travels in much writing. As a scholar, he is characterized by contemporaries as an innovator, a serious explorer of religion and geography, and a brilliant speaker of several languages (including some ancient ones). Of particular note is his interest in putting pen to paper about important events occurring in his time and in helping preserve rare artifacts, with him known to have personally purchased all kinds of rare artifacts and contributed them to Russian museums and collectors.

Contemporaries noted A.S. Norov's exceptional literary ability, his writing distinguished by clarity of expression, the use of beautiful metaphors and figures of speech, and flawless logic.

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