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General V.M. Moltchanoff's Oral Memoirs

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The oral memoirs of General V.M. Moltchanoff, who was one of the military leaders of the White Movement in Russia during the Civil War, are interpreted. These memoirs give new information about the pre-revolutionary period of the Russian Army, the Civil War and Russian emigration to the USA.

Keywords: Historical memory, Oral History, the Civil War, White Movement, Russian emigration.

Victorin Mihailovich Moltchanoff is the general of White Movement who was a very popular person in Russia during the Civil War. He had a very interesting biography. His name is often mentioned in the memoirs of Russian emigrants, writings of historians and writers. The general didn't leave memoirs, but he left his recorded oral stories, which were made in January, 1970. This oral history of V. M. Moltchanoff is very interesting. His oral stories and opinions give new information about the Russian officers, Russian Civil War and its consequences.

Moltchanoff was born in 1886 in Chistopol, Volga region. He graduated from gymnasium and entered the military school in Moscow. After the graduation of the military school he served in Caucasus and Far East as the officer of Russian Army. Then he took part in the First World War. During the Revolution of 1917 in Petrograd Moltchanoff was at the front near Baltic Sea. In February 1918 Moltchanoff was wounded and captured by Germans. However, he managed to escape and come back to the territory of Soviet

Russia. After that, Moltchanoff was demobilized and went to Chistopol, where his mother lived. Soon he became the leader of the peasant detachment, that fought against Bolsheviks. In January 1919 Moltchanoff joined Kolchak's Army and led the Izhevsk brigade composed of Izhevsk's workers. This brigade fought against the Red Army very effectively. Later it was reorganized into the division. After the retreat of the White Army in Baikal region Moltchanoff became the leader of the army corps. In December 1921 he became the commander of the army, which occupied Habarovsk. After the defeat of the White Army in Far East general Moltchanoff emigrated to China. Then he went to Japan with his family. In 1923 he, his wife and their son went to the USA where they settled down in San Francisco. Moltchanoff changed several jobs. Finally, he was accepted to the post of the superintendent of some American corporation. The General lived a long life. He died in January 1975 in San Francisco and was buried at Serbian cemetery in Colma (E.V. Volkov, N.D. Egorov,

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I.V. Kupzov, 2003). His whole life was the life of a Russian officer devoted to the fatherland.

The name of general Moltchanoff is mentioned in memoirs of Russian emigrants. Some former participants of White Movement wrote the memoirs, where the activity of general Moltchanoff is described and the general is depicted as a hero (K.V. Saharov, 1923; P.P. Petrov, 1930; B.B. Philimonov, 1932; 1971; A.G. Efmov, 1975). Unlike them, Soviet historians, who studied the Civil War in Russia, showed Moltchanoff as the enemy of Soviet people (P.S. Parfenov, 1925; 1932; B.M. Shereshevsky, 1974; G.V. Kuz'min G.V. 1977; M.I. Svetachev, 1983; *The Civil War in USSR*, 1986; A.D. Samoilov, 1986; I.I. Kartavcev, 1988). The authors of the novels devoted to Russian Civil War, i.e. V. Zazybrin («Two worlds» 1921) and U. Semenov («Parol is not needed» 1965) wrote about Moltchanoff too. They showed the general as brave and clever officer though as the enemy (V.Y. Zazybrin, 1987; U.S. Semenov, 1991). In 1967 the film director B. Grigoryev made a movie on the basis of U. Semenov's novel. All the white officers in the film were showed as enemies and Moltchanoff was among them. Thus, studying historical records and fiction we can find the controversial information about general Moltchanoff.

The general didn't write memoirs, but he left his oral stories recorded by Boris Raymond (B. Raymond) in January, 1970¹. For several

weeks B. Raymond met with old general, talked to him and recorded his stories. After that B. Raymond transferred them into written form. Now Moltchanoff's oral history is in the archives of California University in Berkeley.

The Moltchanoff's oral memoirs of give valuable information about the pre-revolution Russian army, the Civil War and Russian emigration in the USA (*V. M. Moltchanoff: The last white general*, 1972). As in many memoirs people knowing the general in person, general Moltchanoff looks in his own flashbacks as a hero, having only positive features and taking only right decisions. For example, reconstructing the events of his service on Caucasus, he said that he had successfully negotiated with one of the khans without anybody's help. In the period of the Civil War he did a brilliant military career, from that of a lieutenant colonel to the lieutenant-general, becoming one of the well-known military leaders of the White army on the East of Russia. Then, in emigration, he became the leader of the veterans of the revolt in Izhevsk and Votkinsk (1918). On the whole, the image depicted by the memoirs portrayed the general as a bold and clever officer-patriot, whose example we should follow.

Being a military man, he is bold and sharp when characterizing military leaders and colleagues. Speaking about the relations between the command personnel and the soldiers in Tsar's army, Moltchanoff, did not hide the truth and admitted the numerous cases of bad behavior of officers, which oppressed the soldiers. Therefore, Moltchanoff put some blame for the soldiers' revolt on the officers who

¹ Boris Raymond was born of Russian parents in Harbin, China, in 1925. His father, Dimitry Romanoff, was a young officer of the Imperial Guard during the First World War. After the Revolution he lived in Siberia, in the ranks of Admiral Kolchak's White army, with which he eventually retreated through Siberia to China, where Mr. Raymond was born. Mr. Raymond's maternal grandfather, Boris Ostroumoff, played a prominent role in Manchuria as a general manager of the Chinese Far Eastern Railroad. Mr. Raymond was educated in French and British schools in Tientsin, Shanghai and Saigon. In April 1941 he came to San Francisco, where he graduated from George Washington High School in 1943. After serving in the Army of the USA and seeing combat as an infantryman in Europe, Mr. Raymond returned to California, where he began his studies at the University

of California, Berkeley where he received the B.A., M.A. (Sociology), and M.L.S. degrees. In 1964 he joined the University Library staff as Russian bibliographer. He became Assistant Director of Libraries, University of Manitoba in Canada, in 1967. Since 1972 he was a teacher in the Department of Sociology University of Winnipeg in Canada. Now Mr. Raymond is teacher in Dalhousie University (New Scotland, Canada), and is continuing his research on the history of Russian emigration.

had not managed to cope with the misconduct and abuses in the army.

The Moltchanoff's impressions about the moods among the officers at the beginning of the First World War are very interesting. At that time many officers wanted to be directed to the front, as they were afraid the military campaign to be soon over and they wouldn't have the possibility to get rewards. The general accuses the military command of the Russian army for doing nothing to save the officer corps. Many Russian officers died on the fields of the First World War.

Moltchanoff mentioned an interesting fact, which is very characteristic for the soldiers' views on the events of 1917. It shows their attitude to the personality of Nickolay II after his abdication. They suppose German wife of the Tsar is the cause of the misfortunes in Russia.

Certainly, the greatest part of the general's oral memoirs is devoted to the Civil War. He spoke much about the soldiers and officers of the White Army. Moltchanoff was a monarchist. Even in 1917 he was very cautious about the Temporary Government. He considered L.G. Kornilov, who arrested the Tsar's family, to be a traitor, even, in spite of the fact that afterwards Kornilov became one of the leaders of the White Movement.

Nevertheless, with age Moltchanoff reconsidered the monarchical views he had had and criticized the monarchy. He underlined many mistakes made by the Emperor Nicolay II. The general didn't see among Romanoff family people able to replace Nickolay II. Certainly, we should keep in mind that it is Moltchanoff's point of view that he had, having spent many years in the USA and enough time to contemplate on the events that took place in Russia in 1917.

The oral memoirs of the general contain very interesting portrait descriptions of some military leaders of the White troops. The attitude of Moltchanoff toward the admiral A.V. Kolchak is exceptionally positive. He considered Kolchak to

be the hero of the First World War, and as soon as Moltchanoff got to know about the governmental coup in Omsk in November 1918, he admitted his power as Supreme Ruler legitimate. Moltchanoff never mentioned he had known Kolchak in person, though Kolchak was often at the front and must have seen Moltchanoff and might have spoken to him.

The general described one interesting episode. Once Moltchanoff was asked whether his division would be able to take Kolchak under the guard during the defeat of White troops and their katabasis to the East of Russia. Certainly, Moltchanoff could not give a negative answer. So the question, set forward by the General Headquarters, was apparently formulated with the participation of Kolchak and it vividly shows the degree of Kolchak's trust to Moltchanoff.

Moltchanoff considered general M.V. Khanzhin, the Commander of the Western army and the Military Minister of Kolchak's government, to be not a very capable leader, who didn't understand the situation, gave orders that are impossible to obey. For example, Khanzhin's order, to give the soldiers of the Izhevsk brigade a vacation after taking their native city under control was an indefensible mistake from Moltchanoff's point of view.

Unlike many other authors of memoirs, Moltchanoff is not so critically estimated the activity of general K.V. Sakharov. And at times he even praises him, underlining his abilities and energy. For example, the unfulfilled plan of the Red troops surrounding under Chelyabinsk in July 1919, developed under the direct guidance of Sakharov, Moltchanoff considered a brilliant one. Moltchanoff sees the reasons for the negative attitude toward Sakharov among many officers and officials in the fact that Sakharov tried to put in an order not only in the troops but in the rear as well, in particular in Omsk. He made an effort to send many officers to the front but the resistance

from the military bureaucracy turned out to be stronger.

Moltchanoff calls in question the talents of legendary White general V.O. Kappel Moltchanoff, supposing that V.O. Kappel showed his best in Povolzh'e, when he commanded the soldiers-volunteers. Afterwards when Kappel had to give orders to large connections from mobilized and not reliable people, he failed. He was not able to manage such army effectively. Moltchanoff supposed Kappel to be an ambitious and arrogant person. According to his opinion, Kappel couldn't stand the people who were more talented than he was, and in the staff, as a rule, he had incapable officers.

The known figure of the White Movement, general M.K. Diterikhs, from Moltchanoff's point of view had a reputation of a deeply religious man that was keen on mysticism. He didn't pay much attention to battle operations and as a military leader appeared to be unprofessional.

From all the White military leaders Moltchanoff highly estimated general S.N. Voycekhovsky. He admitted that S.N. Voycekhovsky understood any military situation perfectly and gave the right orders.

The general negatively spoke about Zabaykalsk ataman G.M. Semenov. Though considering him a brave Cossack officer, Moltchanoff condemned the actions of Cossacks who robbed the local population and killed the prisoners. In the interview Moltchanoff refused taking part in the conspiracy against Semenov.

The main reasons of the defeat of White Movement in Moltchanoff's opinion were connected with the subjective factors such as the activity of concrete leaders, who did not have enough skills, administrative experience and talents for victory over Bolsheviks. Moltchanoff didn't talk about political, economic, social reasons of Bolshevik's victory over the White troops.

Social and political activity of Moltchanoff in emigration was connected with the Society of Russian veterans of Great War (San Francisco). For a few years he was the member of this organization. However later Moltchanoff argued with the chairman of the Society – baron A.P. Budberg, former Military Minister of Kolchak's government. In 1932 Moltchanoff and some of his companion-in-arms left the veteran organization (E.V. Volkov, 2007).

The oral memoirs of the General give a partial answer to the question, why the veterans had left the organization. Moltchanoff and his companion-in-arms supposed that Budberg, being a bureaucrat, did not take part in the acts of war and, as Moltchanoff thought, had no right to argue about the actions of battle of the White troops commanders.

Answering the question of B. Raymond about the life in the Soviet Society at the beginning of 70-s, Moltchanoff predicted the falling of the Soviet regime when the population would rise against it. The general counted on well-educated and creative young people, who knew the way for the country to go .

Moltchanoff as a supporter of hard power considered that dictatorship could be an acceptable regime in difficult periods of the country development. For example, speaking about the political situation in the United States at the beginning of 70-s, and, in particular, about the conflict between president R. Nikson and congressmen, blocking his decisions, the general supposed that at the moment the presidential dictatorship was the necessary condition of further progressive development of the country.

What didn't Moltchanoff tell in the interview? Certainly, it depended on the personality of the informant. The general didn't talk much about the traumatic experience of his life, about the things which are difficult to remember. He told

practically nothing neither about his first wife, died when they lived in the USA, nor about the son. He didn't say a word about his second marriage, besides a short mention while answering some other question. The general didn't describe the bloody naturalistic pictures of Red and White terror. He talked not much about the companion-in-arms died during the Civil War. In his oral interview it is impossible to meet the references to his personal mistakes and failures, which are quite natural for any human being. Moltchanoff didn't talk about them. He portrayed himself as hero, who had a successful life, in spite of the difficulties he had to overcome.

Certainly, human memory is unsafe and somewhere the general mixed the confused the names of some geographical places, the chronology of events, the names of people he met in his life. But on the whole at his 84 he had good memory and bright mind, because much he had said was confirmed by other historical sources. There is one more thing why Moltchanoff's oral memoirs are interesting. First of all, they allowed us to better understand their author, the man who lived a long and difficult life. Experience is the

source of any memoirs. Analyzing the interviews given by Moltchanoff we can assume that he was a self-confident and ambitious man, who did not doubt in the correctness of his actions and didn't think much about the negative consequences of his acts. In his story he portrayed himself as a bold, sharp, clever and at times a cruel military leader. Secondly, Moltchanoff's interview as a fact of oral history can dispel the historical myths, dominating in our society, about the pre-revolution Russian Army, the First World and Civil wars, the White Movement and Russian Emigration. Thirdly, oral memoirs give new historical facts for the researcher.

In that way V.M. Moltchanoff was a person who made a brilliant career in the White Army and became general. His biography was the life of a brave and clever Russian officer. The name of Moltchanoff is mentioned in the writings of Russian emigrants, Soviet historians and novelists. He left memoirs recorded. These materials are very interesting for historians and other persons who study Russian History. I believe Moltchanoff's oral memoirs are worth publishing in modern Russia.

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