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The Memoirs of Count Witte. by Sidney Harcave

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The Memoirs of Count Witte. Translated and edited by SIDNEY HARCARE.
Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, Inc., 1990. 885 pp.

Sidney Harcave, professor emeritus of history at the State University of New York at Binghamton, has written a number of works on pre-revolutionary Russian history. His most recent contribution is a new translation of Count Sergei I. Witte's memoirs, which draws on two earlier texts—one known as the Yarmolinsky version (1921) and the other the I. V. Hessen edition (1920–23). In addition, Harcave provides his analysis of Witte's role in Russian politics around the turn of the century.

Witte has intrigued historians both because of the nature of his personality and because of the difficulties of the social and political crisis he faced. He served as Minister of Finance, 1892–1903, and then as premier, 1905–6, while Czarist Russia was in the throes of profound social, economic, cultural, and political upheaval created by modernization. Witte was the major author of the government's policies of modernization and he set forth his own view of Czarist autocracy's role in reform within a memorandum he wrote to proposals raised in the Special Conference (1904). Witte offered an architectural metaphor, "The Russian state edifice, unlike the European, did not rise on the soil of previously existing estate foundations and does not rest on such foundation." He added, "Not having opponents, the Russian supreme authority needs no allies." In fact, the "Witte system" never saw representative institutions as critical. It had, however, emphasized that the promoting of industry at the expense of agriculture had helped to drive the Russian nobility to ruin. Consequently, for Witte and for Czarist Russia, there were no basic social or political forces remaining to save the monarchy from disaster. In 1905, when Witte was acting as premier, the government faced an unprecedented challenge from its own citizens, a challenge exceeded only by the forces unleashed in the 1917 revolution which brought down the Czarist edifice.

In fact, Witte had been in a constant struggle to preserve his position and his policies during the years from 1899 to 1903. Under the "Witte system" taxes had risen sharply and were especially oppressive for rural populations as compared with industrial and commercial enterprises in the large cities. Still, in the top strata of society, many were distressed by the size of the new foreign debt, while many ordinary peasants were in a terrible economic plight. Fueled by strikes, the general wave of discontent built up to the point of revolution. In the face of the crisis neither conservatives nor liberals could find a solution and Witte's leadership collapsed in April 1906. He had managed to steer the antiquated monarchy through the darkest days of the 1905 revolution, but he achieved only a temporary reprieve.

For the present-day reader, Witte's memoirs are to be read primarily as the reflections of a key historical player in the events he describes. Also, Witte provides his own views on many eminent figures in Russian life. Since Witte stands at the center of modern Russian developments, his perception of events and his acquaintance with individuals around the throne provide a valuable insight into many decisive situations. For the Chinese reader, the memoir reveals a different point of view about the significance of the Sino-Russian Treaty of 1896, which was so closely tied to the Russian project for a trans-Siberian railroad.

Witte's memoir is eminently readable and accessible in Harcave's fluent and faithful English translation. Harcave has provided a valuable addition to the older translations of this important memoir.

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