

IGOR ZIMIN<sup>1</sup> ANDRZEJ GRZYBOWSKI

## Spectacles in Russia from Moscow Tsardom to Russian Empire. XVII – first half of the XIX Century.

Okulary w Rosji. Od cesarstwa moskiewskiego XVII wieku do imperium moskiewskiego w I połowie XIX wieku

<sup>1</sup> Pavlov First St. Petersburg Medical University

<sup>2</sup> Department of Ophthalmology, University of Warmia and Mazury, Olsztyn, Poland

<sup>3</sup> Institute for Research in Ophthalmology, Foundation for Ophthalmology Development, Poznan, Poland

### Abstract

This review article presents and discusses the available information on the early spectacles in Russia. The early descriptions on ophthalmologists in Russia come from the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, but the first Russian oculist in Moscow was probably Fedor Dorofeev who lived in the second half of this century. The Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich (1645-1676) used glasses in the last years of his life. The article presents how different optical devices were used by different noble people in Russia up to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**Key words:** History of Russian ophthalmology; history of ophthalmology; history of spectacles;

The history of ophthalmology, at least in its early years, is often associated with the sight peculiarities of top figures who received the most technologically advanced medical care of the time. Ophthalmic artifacts kept in museums and private collections also belonged to them.

“Sitting in my nest, looking at the rest”, the proverb says. Bound “by profession”, Russian tsars and emperors had no choice but to “see the rest”, which was guaranteed by various sources of information. At the same time, visual acuity was also of great importance to them, the same as for any other person.

According to the preserved documents, professional ophthalmologists first appeared in the staff of the Pharmaceutical Prikaz (Aptekarskiy Prikaz – an office regulating medical issues) in early 17<sup>th</sup> century. The Pharmaceutical Prikaz was the office in charge of health care for Moscow elites. The service originated in the last years of the reign of Ivan IV (1533-1584) and was finally established in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, after the Time of Troubles in the earlier part of that century. For example, in a staffing list of 1627 an eye doctor or, as they said, “eyeman”, was mentioned. We know the name of a non-Russian eye doctor, David Brun, who earned 97 rubles in 1632 for his services. [1] European physicians had been invited to Russia since Tsar Ivan IV. Year later, Johann Schwartling, who came from Hamburg in 1676 and trained Fedor Dorofeev in 1677, who is belie-

ved to be the first Russian oculist in Moscow, became an eye doctor in the Pharmaceutical Prikaz.

Speaking of Ophthalmology in the XVII century, it should be borne in mind that this medical profession was quite rare, so the inevitable staff rotation caused difficulties. According to the documents of Pharmaceutical Prikaz, certain difficulties arose [2] when, in 1669, they tried to hire a “good ophthalmologist”, 46-year-old Swede, Yagan Erickson, under Tsar Alexei Milhailovich. As was customary at the time, ophthalmologists also treated “calculi diseases and all kinds of serious injuries, cancer, and other similar diseases, and they visited many countries to study”. [2]

The point is that the Ericson was not satisfied with the standard salary the Pharmaceutical Prikaz officials offered to him, and had not come to Moscow: “It was ordered to call an eye doctor to Moscow and to promise him the tsar’s mercy and the salary his colleagues doctors had”. Boris von Rosenberg asked a special salary for his protege, i.e. particularly high, but was offered the same money as others got. Johann von Rosenberg Coster (has lived in Moscow in years 1667-76) and his son Boris von Rosenberg (who lived in Moscow in years 1673-75) were doctors who originated from Lubeck. Doctors from Lubeck were not rare during the reign of Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich. His private doctor, Ivan Andreev Kusteriusom, was born there and was trained in Konigsberg and for some time worked as the private physician of Swedish king Carl Gustav. Probably, the eye doctor Erickson found the salary too small; that is why we do not see his name among 11 doctors who came with Vilim Gorsten in May 1679” [2].

It is worth mentioning in the context of the topic that glasses as an optical device appeared in late XIII century. Russian monarchs were not long-livers but they and their loved ones periodically had eye problems. The historical medical literature mentions that, in the last years of his life, the Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich (1645-1676) used glasses. We can see some ophthalmologic artifacts of the XVII century nowadays. For example, at the Exhibition “The Wise Two. The Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich and Patriarch Nikon” the silver-framed correcting glasses kept in the house treasury of Patriarch Nikon were displayed.[3] (Fig.1) By that time, glasses were quite common for Europe. We can find information on the vision condition of the top figures of the Russian Empire both in memoirs and due to material artifacts – surviving lorgnettes and other vision aids. It should be highlighted that memoir writers rarely mentioned such “trifles”, as glasses. Only those who saw the royal persons in private could see them. One of the memoir writers, when describing the appearance of

Catherine II, mentioned that she “read wearing glasses and, moreover, with a magnifying glass” [4]. Indeed, the Empress started to use reading glasses in the 1770s. By that time, glasses had almost modern construction, since London optician Edward Scarlett added temple pieces to spectacles in the early XVIII century. Despite the apparent simplicity, it was a very important design improvement, as it allowed one to freely work with documents.



Fig.1 Spectacles of Patriarch Nikon. Source: Exhibition catalog. Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich and Patriarch Nikon. M., 2005. p.165. №83. Glasses with case. Russia. XVII. Silver, correcting glass; carving, gilding. Glass diameter 4.3 cm; points. Case 10 cm 2. 5.6 cm. Points in a silver frame, diopter lens. The frame is made of a silver strip attached at the ends of the cable.

The fact that Catherine II had ophthalmologic problems in 1770s is evidenced by the bill of December 24, 1770 [5], against which 1,219 rubles were paid to the court jeweler Lazarev for an “optic glass rimmed in gold and decorated with diamonds”. Apparently, it was a framed magnifying glass with luxury decorations. The glasses of the Empress Catherine II that became a treasured antiquity during her lifetime, are kept in the Moscow State Historical Museum (SHM). (Fig.2, Fig.3) Catherine II presented “her own” glasses in the case to the Vice-Governor of St. Petersburg Novosiltsev in 1786. By that time spectacles were no longer a rarity, but it was a thing of the great Empress, so the gift was carefully stored. The eyeglass case was made of gold,

silver, sharkskin and velvet, and the glasses themselves – of silver with glass lenses. According to the palace legend, Novosiltsev came to the Empress with his report early in the morning. Catherine II, who started the morning with the review of official papers and letters, was sitting at the desk in her study. That was where she kept her glasses, so that only close people authorized to enter her private apartments could see her wearing them. During the report, Novosiltsev could not refer to the prepared documents as, according to him, he had “weak eyes”. It was then, when Catherine II presented him her glasses.



Fig.2 Spectacles and case belonging to Catherine II. Spectacles: silver, correcting glasses; correcting glass; green case: silver sharkskin; the other case: silver, velvet, engraving. Source: Exhibition catalog. Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich and Patriarch Nikon. M., 2005.



Fig.3 Glasses and case of Catherine II. Source: Exhibition catalog. Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich and Patriarch Nikon. M., 2005.

In the XVIII century reading itself was often considered as a serious cause for the loss of vision. For example, in 1745, the Empress Elizabeth Petrovna was concerned that the young Grand Duchess Catherine Alekseevna (the future Catherine II) read a prayer-book in the evenings by candlelight. Catherine II recalled: “The next day the Empress sent me a prayer-book prin-

ted in large letters to save my eyes, according to her”. In fact, the very possession of such a prayer-book in large letters by Elizabeth Petrovna is indirect evidence of her ophthalmic problems.

It is interesting that the order completely forbidding using vision aids during official court activities was established in late XVIII century at the Russian imperial court. Of course, it was not an official ban, but rather a certain “past tradition”, which was sometimes stronger than written restrictions. Apparently, such a tradition developed at the turn of XVII-XIX<sup>th</sup> centuries during the reign of Paul I. The fact is that the short-sighted Empress Maria Feodorovna, who strictly observed the norms of the court etiquette, thought that glasses destroyed the traditional look of the Russian autocrat, therefore, she tried not to use glasses or even a lorgnette, at least not in public.

The court nobility also had to observe the established dress code that banned the use of vision aids. Therefore, poor eyesight for the Russian emperors and their families became a problem, but was only during ceremonial events. Monocles, lorgnettes, and glasses were allowed in personal imperial rooms. The monocle, as an optical device, was invented in the XIV century. Originally it was a lens fixed on a long handle, which was held over the text or in front of the eyes. In the XVI<sup>th</sup> century, the monocle handle disappeared since it became common to wear a monocle fixing it by facial muscles. A lorgnette is a kind of vision aid, the design of which supposes the fixing of a pair of lenses in a frame attached to the handle. It was a popular aristocratic accessory in late XVIII<sup>th</sup> – early XIX<sup>th</sup> century. Folding lorgnettes first appeared in 1818. There was the term “quizzing”, which meant look directly through one’s lorgnette.

In her memoirs, Maria Feodorovna expressly recognized that her “eyesight was very poor”. Describing the funeral of her son, the Emperor Alexander I, in March 1826, she noted: “...unwilling to use a lorgnette, I could not watch the facial expressions. but I saw that many women held handkerchiefs”[6]. The phrase contains a very important detail: “unwilling to use a lorgnette”. That is, a lorgnette was used in daily life of Russian aristocracy and did not destroy the monarch’s image in the eyes of his inner circle. (Fig. 4) Moreover, a lorgnette was a part of exquisite social games, the same as the “fan language”. However, it was absolutely impossible to visit a public ceremony with a lorgnette in one’s hands, regardless of the poorness of one’s eyesight. The Emperor Paul I also used a lorgnette.



Fig. 4 Lornet of Empress Maria Feodorovna. Russia. The first quarter of the XIX century. Source: The State Historical Museum. Moscow.

A double lorgnette of Paul I produced in the last quarter of the XVIII century has been kept in the Armory Chamber since 1827 (silver, mother of pearl, ivory, glass, engraved mother of pearl, moulding, gilt). It is a double lorgnette with round lenses in a silver-gilt frame strengthened by fine articulated curved handles in a mother of pearl case. Since it was an “imperial” lorgnette, the case was decorated with the profiles of Paul I and his wife, Maria Feodorovna, in round medallions surmounted by crowns of laurel.[7]

However, there is an exception to every rule. During the reign of Alexander I and Nicholas I, the most famous court “bespectacled” the Foreign Minister, Count Karl Vasilyevich Nesselrode (1780-1862), who was permitted to wear glasses by Alexander I was. Later people began to say that Nicholas I sees the emerging foreign policy problems through “Nesselrode’s glasses”.



Fig. 5 Portrait of Karl Nesselrode (1780-1862) – Earl, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Empire. Artist F. Kruger. 1840s.

Contemporaries who described the Count’s appearance always mentioned his glasses: “His face was thin, with a noticeable nose crook, amazing eyes sparkled through his glasses”. However, K. V. Nesselrode was not the only person wearing glasses in St. Petersburg beau monde of Alexander I and Nicholas I times.

Regarding Alexander I, the Emperor’s problems were more serious than those of his parents, as he had not only poor eyesight but bad hearing too. He could hardly hear what his interlocutors on the opposite side of the dining table had said. All this gave rise to the mistrustfulness common for people with poor hearing and eyesight. But he was not a simple suspicious man but a suspicious monarch, which is threatening and his inner circle periodically felt that mistrust.

With regard to his eyesight, Alexander I, who was myopic, used lorgnettes regularly, two of which are currently kept at the Grand Palace of Tsarskoye Selo.[8] His eyesight was so poor that he was obliged to keep a lorgnette permanently at hand, literally, since he hid it in the right-hand pocket of his redingote. This was not a very practical solution and Alexander I lost his lorgnette regularly. Therefore, tied the lorgnette to a button on the sleeve of his redingote. Contemporaries relate that “he constantly brought up to his eye a gilt lorgnette that was hanging from his right hand”. (Fig.5)

A broken lorgnette belonging to the emperor, exhibited at the Armory Palace in the Kremlin, bears witness to the fact that Alexander I broke his lorgnettes regularly. Literature of the time underlines the fact that the lens of the Tsar’s lorgnette had very high magnifying power. The tortoiseshell frame of the lorgnette is split.[9] Perhaps the lorgnette was split in the case described in the memoirs “Before saying goodbye to me, the Emperor got up and, not saying a word, started to look for something, inspecting the floor in all corners of the living room. I put the lamp on the carpet and began to look for the lost object, too: it turned out that the Emperor was looking for a small opera-glass, which he usually used and which fell to my feet under the table. It was made of turtle and had not decorations”. [10] (Fig.6)

As for the Empress Elizabeth Alekseevna, according to her letters, she was long-sighted in her younger years, but of course she did not wear glasses. In April 1804, Elizabeth Alekseevna wrote to her mother: “My eyes have been slightly aching for two weeks already although I am not really ill. But as soon as I am overworked I feel the pain, which is sometimes inconvenient. They say that the sight of such long-sighted people like me deteriorates much faster, and I am afraid that I would have to wear glasses earlier than I would like to.

I will try to do exercises for eyes, and if it does not help, I will have to use plaster as it seems to me that the reason is a bad cold I had two weeks ago. Forgive me, mother, my rhetoric about the diseases. But this is the only disease that seriously bothers me; in all other respects, I do not care about health and do not know what I would prefer: chest or eye disease. Nothing terrifies me so much as the thought of the loss of vision. However, my kind mummy, I inherited the poor sight from you”.[11] In this passage of 25-year-old Empress, the mentioning of some exercises for eyes is noteworthy, as it would be possible only after consultation with a professional eye doctor.

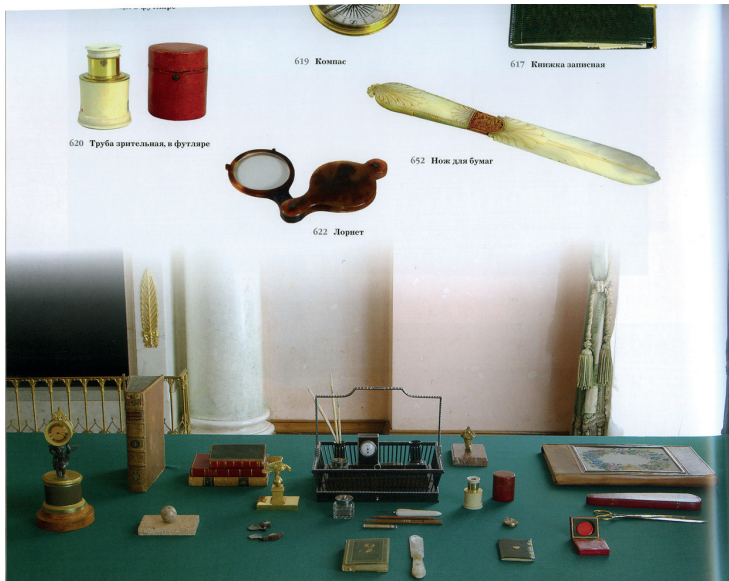


Fig.6 Desk in the Cabinet of the Emperor Alexander I in the Great Catherine Palace of Tsarskoye Selo. On the table are two monacles belonging to the Emperor. Source: The Sphinx, unsolved till death ...// Alexander I. Source: Catalog of the exhibition of the State Hermitage. SPb., 2005.

By the beginning of the XIX<sup>th</sup> century, glasses and monacles lorgnettes were firmly established among the “scrupulous” household trifles of European aristocracy among therefore, both men and ladies, so they were decorated in the most luxurious way. This led to the fact that such optical “devices” were manufactured by jewelers along with “mechanics”. It is noteworthy that lorgnettes of aristocrats sometimes performed other utilitarian

functions. For example, the unique artifacts such as a fan-lorgnette and a watch-lorgnette is kept at the State Hermitage Museum collection. (Fig. 6-8) In the latter case the watch mechanism was mounted on the upper section of the lorgnette closed by a blind cover. The lorgnette itself resembling modern folding glasses was on the other side of the pendant. These expensive watches were manufactured in 1840-1860s and apparently were owned by a certain aristocrat.[12] The pendant is covered with a blue cloisonne enamel on a guilloche background; there is a diamond flower in the center. (Fig. 9-10)



Fig.7 Monocle of the Emperor Alexander I. Source: The State Historical Museum. Moscow. Correcting glass, turtle, steel.



Fig. 8 A magnifying glass, which belonged to Alexander I. Source: Museum of the War of 1812 in Moscow.



Fig.9. Folding lorgnette. Russia. The second half of the XIX century. Source: The State Hermitage Museum.



Fig.10. Watch pendant with folding lorgnette. Switzerland. 1840-60-ies. Gold, copper alloys, correcting glass, steel, diamonds, colored enamel. Source: The State Hermitage Museum.

Speaking of the first half of the XIX<sup>th</sup> century, it should be borne in mind that it was the time of so-called “dandyism”. A *dandy* was a man who placed particular importance upon physical appearance and refined language. Spectacles a detail inherited from the previous era of dandies played an important role in dandy behaviour. Spectacles became a kind of fashion item back in the XVIII century. Looking through the spectacles was

equal to looking at someone else’s face at a close range, i.e. to an audacious gesture. Appearances of the XVIII<sup>th</sup> century in Russia banned the younger in age or rank to look through the glasses at the senior: it was considered as insolence. (Fig 11)

Baron **Anton Delvig** (1798-1831), a Russian poet and journalist, recalled that it was prohibited to wear glasses at the Lyceum and that’s why all women seemed to be beauties, ironically adding that, after graduating from the Lyceum and purchasing spectacles he was very disappointed. [13] The combination of glasses and a nifty audacity was noted back in 1765 by V. Lukin in his comedy “The Trinket Vendor” (Shchepetil’nik). Here, the dialogue between the two peasants, Myron and Vasily, speaking dialects, who preserved the natural purity of unspoiled hearts, describes a strange custom of the nobility: “Miron-worker (holding a sight tube): Vasyuk, look at it. We play such pipes and here they have an eye narrowed to look at something. And it would be nice if they did it from a distance but they steer at each other faces close”. They seem to have no shame at all!” [13]

I. V. Gudovich, Moscow Commander in Chief in early XIX<sup>th</sup> century, was strongly against glasses and tore them off young people’s faces with the following



Fig. 11 Ladies with lornetes. Illustration of a fashion magazine. Source: Zimin I.V. Doctors of the court of His Imperial Majesty, or How they treated the royal family. The daily life of the Russian Imperial Court. Tsentrpoligraf, 2016.

words: “There is nothing here for you to look at so intently!” This was when the pranksters leash a horse wearing glasses along Moscow boulevards with a note on it saying: “And it is only three years old”. [13] Dandyism introduced its colour in this fashion: a lorgnette, which was considered as a sign of Anglomania, appeared. Pushkin wrote in his “Onegin’s Journey” with friendly irony: “Tumansky in sonorous stanzas Described the town: ...Lorgnette in hand, our friend would wander, A veritable poet, yonder, Alone along the sea shore...” [14] Tumansky, who arrived in Odessa from the Collège de France where he completed the course of studies, observed all the rules of dandy behaviour that caused Pushkin’s friendly irony. A specific feature of dandy behaviour was also examining through a glass not a stage, but the ladies’ suites. Onegin underlines the dandy character of such an action gesture by “looking askance”, which was considered rudeness: “he steers straight to his stall, then turns his spectacles on unknown ladies in the tiers...”. A female variant of “bald optics” was a lorgnette if when used to looking not at the scene: “No lorgnettes were trained upon Our Tanya, no discerning eye, No connoisseur with opera glass, From loge or parterre, saw her pass...”. [13]

It is noteworthy that there are no images of emperors and their wives using glasses or lorgnettes in the iconography of the top figures of the Russian Empire until early XX<sup>th</sup> century. Meanwhile, two lorgnettes of Emperor Alexander I are kept in the “Private Rooms” of Catherine Palace in the Tsarskoye Selo.

As mentioned before, poor eyesight became a problem for the Russian rulers and their families as the unwritten tradition of etiquette prohibiting wearing of glasses at the imperial court was established at the turn of XVIII<sup>th</sup> – early XIX<sup>th</sup> centuries. The fact that those in

power in Russia saw the use of “optic devices” as a sort of Fronde and later as indecent behavior, is evidenced by numerous memoirs and urban legends. For example, in order to stop the golden youth fashion of using lorgnettes, Catherine II ordered policemen in the capital to be equipped with them.

The court nobility and *beaumonde* also had to observe the established dress code that banned using vision aids. No wonder that the novel of D. S. Merezhkovsky “Alexander I” begins with the following phrase: “Glasses ruined Prince Valerian Mikhailovich Golitsyn’s career”. [15] As follows from the text, the Minister of Public Education and the Chief Procurator of the Synod, Prince A. N. Golitsyn was deeply concerned to learn that his nephew, chamber junker, Prince V. M. Golitsyn, appeared at the ball in the Winter Palace wearing glasses. The chamber junker at fault, apologizing, said that he had “lost touch with the local rules and completely forgot that wearing glasses in the presence of highest persons was not allowed...”.

Looking at the others through a lorgnette was considered a king of challenge. Let’s recall how Pushkin’s Onegin looked at unfamiliar ladies at the theater through the lor-

gnette (“he steers straight to his stall, then turns his glasses on unknown ladies in the tiers”) or Lermontov’s Pechorin who boldly eyed Princess Mary: “I directed my eyeglass at her and saw that his glance brought a smile to her face while my impertinent examination made her very angry. Indeed, how dare a Caucasian army officer level an eyeglass at a princess from Moscow?” [16]

However, there were exceptions of every rule even at the royal court. Glasses were banned only during the ceremonial acts. Monocles, lorgnettes, and glasses were allowed in personal imperial rooms. As for the confi-



Fig.12 Dandy. Caricature. Source: Zimin I.V. Doctors of the court of His Imperial Majesty, or How they treated the royal family. The daily life of the Russian Imperial Court. Tsentrpoligraf, 2016.

dants, they were allowed to wear glasses only on the will of the emperor.

As for the short-sightedness of the Emperor Alexander I, it is evidenced by numerous memoirs. To what extent was the Tsar shortsighted? With the kind permission of the Directorate of the Tsarskoye Selo State Museum-Preserve and support of ophthalmologists the first Pavlov State Medical University of St. Petersburg. Astakhov and V. R. Grabovetski, the lorgnettes of Alexander I were examined. The lens of the one was  $-3.25$ , the second  $-3.75$ . Thus, the findings suggest that Alexander I had moderately severe myopia. We can assume that Alexander I mainly used lorgnettes to work with documents as they allowed the Emperor to read them quite comfortably with a 30-40 cm distance from the face. Lorgnettes were used in aristocratic circles until the early XX century. The State Hermitage collection keeps a lorgnette made by the well-known jewelry firm of K. Faberge.

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