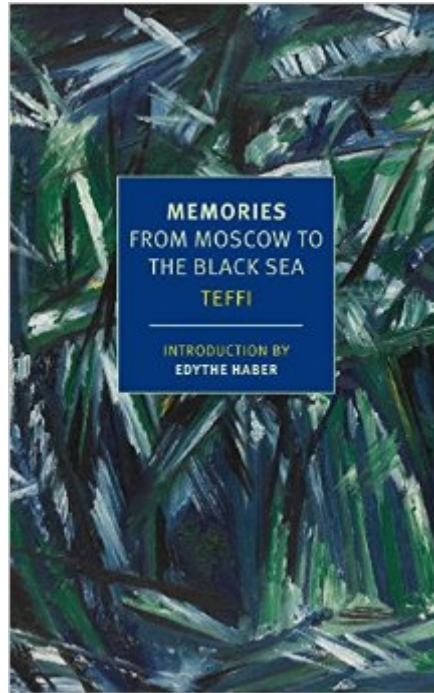


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Memories: From Moscow To The Black Sea (New York Review Books Classics)



Synopsis

Considered Teffi's single greatest work, *Memories: From Moscow to the Black Sea* is a deeply personal account of the author's last months in Russia and Ukraine, suffused with her acute awareness of the political currents churning around her, many of which have now resurfaced. In 1918, in the immediate aftermath of the Russian Revolution, Teffi, whose stories and journalism had made her a celebrity in Moscow, was invited to read from her work in Ukraine. She accepted the invitation eagerly, though she had every intention of returning home. As it happened, her trip ended four years later in Paris, where she would spend the rest of her life in exile. None of this was foreseeable when she arrived in German-occupied Kiev to discover a hotbed of artistic energy and experimentation. When Kiev fell several months later to Ukrainian nationalists, Teffi fled south to Odessa, then on to the port of Novorossiysk, from which she embarked at last for Constantinople. Danger and death threaten throughout *Memories*, even as the book displays the brilliant style, keen eye, comic gift, and deep feeling that have made Teffi one of the most beloved of twentieth-century Russian writers.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Subtitled , *From Moscow to the Black Sea*, this memoir was first serialised in 1928-1930, before being published as a single volume in 1931. Although I had not heard of Teffi , she was one of the most widely read and beloved on Russia's writers; who was both a favourite of both Tsar Nikolai II and of Lenin. Teffi was a pseudonym of Nadezhda Aleksandrovna

Lokhvitskaya (1872-1952), who was born into a distinguished St Petersburg family. This is her story of a journey across Russia in the whirlwind of revolution. It begins in Moscow, where she accepts the suggestion of giving readings in Kiev and Odessa. At that time, she has no plans to leave Russia. However, as she progresses "on interminable train and steamship trips" it gradually becomes obvious that she will be unable to return home and eventually she made a life in France. Of course, Paris was full of Russian "émigrés" and this book is wistful, whimsical and nostalgic in turn; obviously aimed at a readership of those who, like her, had been forced to flee. Although this is full of humour, there is also a real sense of fear as Teffi progresses across the country. There are rumours that her group of actors and writers will be handed over to the Bolsheviks, endless times when trains are halted and Teffi and the others are taken off, unsure of whether they will be asked to entertain those who have stopped them, or possibly dumped in a ditch somewhere and countless small privations and discomfort. There are also lots of larger than life characters, bizarre accusations when she refuses to loan her guitar or requires a spoon on board ship and times when she is in danger because she is viewed as work shy or privileged. This is a country in a state of terror, but is an account by a writer who never lost either her humour or her humanity. Lastly, I received a copy of this book from the publisher, via NetGalley, for review.

Teffi (b. 1872, d. 1952) was a Russian poet and writer. It is only with recent English translations that she is becoming known in this country, but she was wildly popular in Russia before the Revolution. Indeed, she has been compared to Chekhov and reportedly she was Nicholas II's favorite author. With the success of the Bolshevik Revolution, Teffi had to flee Russia. *MEMORIES* is her tale of that flight; at the same time, it constitutes a poignant farewell, to a country and to a way of life. The book begins in Moscow in the winter of 1918. "Those last days were strange indeed. At night we hurried past the dark houses, down streets where people were strangled and robbed." With a small group of theater people, Teffi managed to get on a train to the Ukraine. A long, cold, often-interrupted, and dangerous trip brought her to Kiev, where she stayed several months. Then, it was on to Odessa, and another extended stay. As order collapsed and criminal gangs took over the city, Teffi managed to find a place on a decrepit freighter that slowly sailed across the Black Sea to Sevastopol and then Novorossiisk. She spent the summer of 1919 in Yekaterinodar, then the center and capital of White Russia. Her memoir ends as she once again boards a ship and leaves Russia for good -- first to Constantinople, eventually to Paris. From the steamer, she looks back: "And, like Lot's wife, I am frozen. I have turned into a pillar of salt forever, and I shall forever go on looking, seeing my own land slip softly, slowly away from me." Teffi wrote *MEMORIES* ten years later, in

Paris. She obviously embroidered her memories, as the book contains many detailed conversations that surely were creatively reconstructed. Nonetheless, I believe MEMORIES to be an historically sound, representative account of the flight of the dispossessed Russian gentry. Rapine, murder both as private criminality and thuggish politics, death from Spanish influenza and typhus, scrambling for travel passes, indecisiveness, alternating optimism and despair, bribes and extortion, sleeping on sealskin coats, and occasional, surprising acts of kindness. Absurdity. Tragedy. More than for its history, however, MEMORIES is notable for its style. Teffi was a singular writer, who through charm, humor, and a very light touch achieves a bittersweet work of enduring resonance. The translation is superb; in addition, Robert Chandler supplies several score of very helpful endnotes.

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