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# **The National Library of Russia Entering the Third Century of its Existence**

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May 27, 1995 was the bicentenary of the establishment of Imperial Public Library in Saint Petersburg, now the National Library of Russia. As it grew through the years, it changed the names and the official status, but has retained the main purposes and always functioned as a major research library of Europe.

## **1. The Imperial Public Library**

### **1.1. The Library of the Nation**

The stories of many early national libraries are somewhat similar. They were first founded in Europe. The emergence of new or eventual consolidation in the new status of existing libraries has been known to date from the Age of Enlightenment. The state contributed to answering the demands of the nation for a radically new library type, to enhance the nation's spiritual growth. It was primarily the demand for a library providing most comprehensive collections of both printed and manuscript monuments of the nation's cultural heritage.

In Russia, this type of library was established in 1795 by the decree of Russia's major reformer, the Empress Catherine the Great. The Imperial Public Library was founded in Saint Petersburg. The Empress's idea was "to collect in the library established now all the books of Russia....".

The idea began to be actively implemented in 1808, when Alexey N. Olenin was appointed Director. He started the accumulation of the complete range of Russian printed books. In 1810, the Regulations of Library Administration emphasized its right of legal deposit.

Olenin also initiated works on creating the Russian national bibliography in the Library, permitting retrospective acquisition of Russian and Slavonic books. The work was done by Vassily S. Sopikov. He was also to become the first curator of the Library's Russian collection.

Another major task - of expanding the stocks of manuscripts and Russian early printed books in the Library, was assigned to Alexander I. Ermolaev.

In the year when Olenin led the Library, it housed only 6 Russian books. In 1841, two years before his death, there were about 30 thousand.

Later, accumulation of comprehensive collections of national printed material, along with preservation and provisions for access, evolved as the Library's main purposes and inherent functions.

## 1.2. The Imperial Library and Europe

In many aspects, the National Library of Russia most resembles the establishments like the Library of the British Museum and the *Bibliothèque Nationale* in Paris, the oldest national libraries of Europe in terms of the richest multipurpose research libraries. Both acted as intermediaries in connecting their countries, their nations with the world's intellectual heritage. This is exactly how Olenin interpreted the purposes of the Imperial Public Library: "The Library is a receptacle for the literature of all ages and all nations"<sup>1</sup>.

Nevertheless, every national library has its unique destiny, and they are all different to the extent of the differences of nations.

The first distinction of the Imperial Public Library was its title, emphasizing both the government status of the library, and the access to general public. Under the Decree of the Empress Catherine the Great the Library was to serve "the public benefit and enlightenment", i.e. provide public access. The very idea of public access conformed to the ideals of Enlightenment, even though it could not be fully implemented in a state maintaining serfdom until 1861. Nonetheless, the focus on establishing and developing a public library was significant in Russia.

The National Library of Russia is comparable to other rich and old national libraries in the richness of its collections, including valuable and unique material. A complete realization of the phenomenon, however, is only possible when account is taken of the unique space of its establishment and growth.

The Library is much younger than other major European national libraries. They became national libraries after having functioned as major collections of written monuments of their countries, Europe and the world. Collections of the libraries in London or Paris had been developed in the course of many centuries.

The Imperial Public Library was an embodiment of the European idea of a national library in a country only partially prepared for the event. It was possible in the city acting as an islet of Europe in Russia, integrating several intersecting and interacting national cultures. The Library was a home for the world cultural heritage.

<sup>1</sup> Cit. from: Golubeva O.D. *Keepers of Wisdom*. M., 1988. P. 21

Among the first and probably most important impulses was acquisition of the very rich collections of the brothers Joseph Andrew and Andrew Stanislaw Zaluski, starting the formation of the Library's stocks. In its turn, the library of Zaluski brothers contained unique collections accumulated from other valuable and old collections in Europe. As regards the events related to bringing the library to Saint Petersburg, they undoubtedly belong to one of the most dramatic pages in the world history of libraries, associated with the tragedy of Poland at the end of the 18th century.

By obtaining the collections of Zaluski brothers, the Library in Petersburg gained connections with European intellectual heritage. During the 19th century, the Library acquired both important private book collections and individual treasures, which later governed the professional interest in NLR collections abroad, and the nature of contacts between the Library in Saint Petersburg and libraries in other countries. The most active acquisition policies were pursued during administration of Modest A. Korf. Among the multiple reforms he undertook to improve Library services in 1850s, particular attention should be drawn to radical changes in foreign-literature acquisition policies. He succeeded in obtaining government funding to purchase individual collections and to promote the practice of donations.

The name of Korf is also associated with the development of the unique collection "Rossica" - books of Russia in foreign languages and translations from the Russian.

In the years of Korf administration the Library in Petersburg was widely recognized as one of the best in Europe.

Since the times of Olenin, there has been an obvious tendency for considering the Library's present and future life in the context of major European libraries. Olenin himself correlated implementation of his plans with personal experience as a user of German libraries. He also strove to give his foreign colleagues some knowledge about his own library. An effort in this direction was a paper describing the Library, published in French.<sup>2</sup>

During the Korf administration, contacts with foreign libraries were particularly close. The Director travelled to gain European experience. Even more active in his studies of European library service was Vasily Sbolshchikov, a librarian and architect. His papers on the subject may be safely considered as Russia's first studies in librarianship. Having appreciated the achievements of his colleagues, primarily the experience of the Library of the British Museum, he could also present the successes of his Library.

As far back as mid-19th century, the Imperial Public Library was among the most active European libraries. Quoting Korf: "from a pupil, it is gradually

<sup>2</sup> Sobolstchikoff B. Principes pour l'organisation et la conservation des grandes bibliothèques. Paris, 1859. 72 P.

becoming a tutor whose example is increasingly gaining followers in terms of interior decorations, exhibitions, cataloguing system..."<sup>3</sup>

## 2. The Main Library of the RSFSR

The year 1917 started a new stage in the development of the Library. The new Communist state needed another library. The ideas of accumulating all printed materials of Russia in Russian and other languages was replaced with the directive to aim at the most complete possible range of material printed within the country. The publications, meanwhile, were strictly censored. Then there were changes in state structure - in 1922 the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was established. In 1925 the V.I. Lenin Public Library of the Union of SSR in Moscow was made the main library of the new state (now Russian State Library). It started building up the complete range of materials from all Union republics. It was also active in managing coordination of libraries in Union Republics and providing some practical assistance.

In the meantime, the Public Library in Leningrad lived a life of its own. The Academician Nikolay Ia. Marr, Director from 1924 to 1930, contributed a great deal to the development of Library traditions, preservation of its unique collections, maintaining continuity in acquisitions. The Library could not avoid involvement in the tragic events associated with repressions during the Stalin regime. In 1937, the Director Michislav M. Dobranitsky was executed by shooting.

Having ceased to act as the main library of the RSFSR. Then, in the late 50s, there was a tendency for expanding its functions. The Library became the centre for research and methodology in libraries of Russia, rendering practical assistance to regional libraries. It was also the centre for scientific research in librarianship. Among the most significant large-scale works one should mention the research program "Library and Scientific Information" led by Irada K. Kirpicheva. The Library coordinated scientific research in all branches of library science, bibliographic studies and book history in the RSFSR. For the enhancement of the Public Library's collaboration with other libraries in Russia at large, and mainly in the 70s, the credit must certainly be given to the previous Director Leonid A. Shilov and Assistant Director for Research Olga D. Golubeva.

A new stage in the Library's development began in mid-1980s. This was related to the beginning of perestroika. Then a new Director - Vladimir N. Zaitsev, was appointed to the Library.

<sup>3</sup> Report for 1860, SPb, 1861, p. 72.

### **3. The Russian National**

#### **3.1. After Perestroika**

Most important changes were evident in Library's life at the turn of 1980-1990. The iron curtain vanished. The foci in social development were changing.

At the beginning of the process, the prospects for the Library, and for other libraries in the country, did not look very promising. Obviously, there were no guarantees for library funding. The previous hierarchy of the leading centre and subordinated libraries was broken, and yet the alternative seemed vague. Moreover, the experience of library-and library-system management in industrially developed countries was, while not unknown, inapplicable in Russian conditions. Librarians in Russia were to examine the system of library management in the West primarily in the context of characteristics of the processes, priorities in handling some of the problems and then turning attention to others, more complicated ones, and, of course, the specific conditions in each of the countries. This was particularly true about library automation efforts. At the same time, our colleagues in the West were to gain awareness of the true conditions of Russia, including its specific features, traditions of history and the experience, both positive and negative.

Today, just a few years later, the situation seems less oppressive. However, this is not due to the fact that those acute problems have been settled at government level. The funds and material support, so important for actual library development, are still lacking. Still acute is the shortage of funds for foreign acquisitions. Domestic acquisitions have even deteriorated, and the Law of legal deposit has been adopted only recently.

However, there has been an evident shift in the positions of individual libraries. They have started independent experiments to solve their problems.

Additionally, the NLR itself, in collaboration with our colleagues in the Ministry of Culture of Russia and some libraries, has initiated and completed the development of the country's first Law of Library Service. The instrument was passed by the State Duma in 1994.

#### **3.2. Access to Collections**

In 1992, the Library was given a new name but not a new status. There have been no changes in its foci. It continues with the full range of its previous functions. But the new conditions permit to regain what was lost and, more important, to improve functioning along priority orientations.

Among the priorities is access to Library collections. This has gained a great deal of support, including automated processing towards printed cards and a whole series of efforts towards creation of an electronic catalogue.

The current projects involves creation of RusMARC format based on the UNIMARC authority file.

The Library relates the solution of automation problems to heir handling on the scale of all libraries in Russia.

The principal feature of the current situation in library automation can be formulated as follows: the libraries have recognized that the principle of local library systems holds no promise in terms of program construction. Obviously, the prevailing debates and errors in handling library problems are due to the lack of a single, unified communications format, to the existence of different search elements, unsolved multilingual problems and different users' interfaces. This means an urgent need for shifting from individual library databases and house local networks to an integrated library network and a unified national library catalogue.

In setting the problems, the NLR starts from the need for an optimal networked library architecture accounting for specific features of libraries in Russia, the need for uniform library standards, a unified format of presenting data on publications in the national languages of Russia and the world in the electronic catalogue, and the basic requirements for OPAC module.

While the actual solution of the problems is yet to be attained, one may mention the active efforts towards their setting and seeking the solutions, made by the NLR in collaboration with colleagues from other libraries, including the Russian State Library.

### 3.3. Preservation of Collections

The other side of the process concerns preservation of the unique stocks of the Library. The unique collections, representing not only the Russian, but rather the European and world heritage, must be safeguarded.

In this case, a series of foci ought to be addressed. The most successful have been the efforts in conservation.

The staff of the research laboratory at the Paper Conservation Service has been performing regular analysis of conditions in NLR collections, developing and implementing new restoration technologies and materials. They are developing examination/test criteria and techniques. Particularly intensive are the efforts in standartization.

The Paper Conservation Service has adequate material facilities, extensive practical experience and high-qualified personnel.

Their main concern in the next few years will be with bulk conervation, namely: paper treament in special chambers and container-preservation procedures.

The problem of preserving the Library's stocks require comprehensive treatment. This will only be possible with adequate storage space and equipment.

Regretfully, the collections are currently divided among thirteen storage areas. Some of the areas are almost inadequate for storage purposes. Put another way, the Library places its hopes for stock preservation on completion of the new Library building in Moscow Avenue. The first stage was to be put into service by the celebrations, which failed unfortunately.

Future prospects involve the stock-preservation program of a multi-regulation storage system. In this context, the Library intends to apply most advanced technologies, to examine and adapt experience of the world's leading libraries which have settled the problems so successfully, and in particular of the Herzog-August-Bibliothek in Wolfenbüttel (Germany), with its specific humidity regulation, a three-floor safe-case for the most valuable collections, and some other solution.

### **3.4. The Old Task in the New Conditions**

The new Russia going the way of social democratization is concerned about developing its national library according to generally accepted conceptions of a national library. Reservation of the type that national libraries in socialist countries possess most specific characteristics, once even finding theoretical substantiations, only meant that the libraries failed in completing their obligations. This holds true about the purpose of preserving the cultural heritage of Russians and other nations of Russia. It is therefore not incidental that from the early 90s the NLR has been placing a strong emphasis on proceeding with additional acquisitions for the collection of "Rossica" and providing access to the legacy of Russian materials outside Russia. It is therefore not incidental that from the early 90s the NLR has been placing a strong emphasis on proceeding with additional acquisitions for the collection of "Rossica" and providing access to the legacy of Russian materials outside Russia. In doing so, the NLR aims at regular and most comprehensive accumulation of Russian foreign publications, including retrospective acquisitions, both in original and duplicate copies.

The NLR regards bibliographic records of "Rossica" as an integral part of national bibliography. The current project is to prepare a multipurpose index to "Rossica", containing records of Russian-foreign and foreign bibliographic sources concerning Russia from the 18th century to the present.

### **3.5. Immediate International Contacts**

Radical changes have also been evident in the opportunities for the Library to participate in international projects and maintain contacts with foreign libraries. Until quite recently, regulations were imposed both on collaboration with this or that organisation, and on choice of partners. Thus the State Public Library was allowed to collaborate with only some of the libraries in socialist countries.



In the IFLA, the USSR was represented by the Library Department of the USSR Ministry of Culture. Very rare and most irregular was SPL's membership in delegations outside the country. Since 1992 the Library has been granted IFLA membership, actively participating in the organisation. Its representatives are working in several task groups.

Membership in an organisation like the European League of Research Libraries (LIBER) was out of the question at the time, the League only admitting individual libraries. The NLR has been taking some part in LIBER. Esko Häkli gave us support when we almost could not afford the membership fees, as Director of the library with which we had very close and long connections - the National Library of Finland-University Library in Helsinki.

Within the LIBER there emerged a most fascinating plan of creating a database of European books of the age of the hand-press (1450 to 1830), i.e. a common European early-print database, at present being implemented with active participation of the project's ideologist - Michael Smetherst, Director at the British Library.

In 1993 the NLR was granted association - and now - full membership in the Consortium, taking an active part in the project.

Among the radically new projects conceived in the new conditions, mention should be made of the working association "Bibliotheca Baltica" focused on the collaboration of Baltic countries.

The Library has been maintaining a fairly broad and successful collaboration program with partners in various countries. An interesting project is the volume containing records of German material of historical value in the collections of the NLR and other Russian libraries, prepared under general supervision of Professor Bernhard Fabian as part of the project "A handbook of German collections of historical value".

Contracts and agreements of direct cooperation have been signed with libraries in Great Britain, Germany, Canada, Poland, the USA, France, Chernogor and Czechia.

The Library has been a regular participant in international book fairs and exhibitions. Thus in 1994 it took part in the five principal exhibitions of the international Voltaire Year, held in Paris, Geneva and Oxford.

Contracts of acquisition have been made with some foreign corporations for literature and equipment to extend the Library's facilities. We have also started collaboration with the National and University Library in Israel under the project of preserving Hebrew manuscripts through restoration and microfiche reproduction. A series of other joint projects have been completed with publishing houses in Austria, Germany, Sweden and some other countries.

#### 4. Time Relationships

The above discussed permits the conclusion that the Library has oriented itself in the new social situation, appreciating the advantages.

The prospects for the Library are related to further extension of the access to the Library's collections both for Russian and international users. This also means hard work to ensure adequate preservation of the Library's collections both for Russian and international users. This also means hard work to ensure adequate preservation of the valuable stocks. Another goal is more intensive use of new, non-traditional media, including compact-discs, and fuller realisation of opportunities for micro-copying.

In the immediate future and in the new building, the Library intends to reject the existing system of field-divisional reading rooms for researchers in the central building, and for the general public - in the building on Fontanka embankment. Time only will show whether the decision of the new building's housing materials published since 1931 was wise. Indeed, the problem of utilizing several areas, and particularly as is the case of the NLR those located at significant distance from each other, is fairly complicated, with no ideal or immediate solutions available.

The central - old building will continue to house specialized collections - fine prints, maps and charts, rare and manuscript materials and some others.

We also anticipate an intensive development of library research. In turn, this will result in the traditional functions of major research libraries, i.e. studies and publications from the Library's unique collections.

The concept of the new building was developed in the conditions of a closed society. The new building was primarily intended to assist in solving the basic problems of practical services and ensuring the preservation of library stocks. This would permit reconstruction of the old building, most urgent in many aspects. In 1985 it was the site of a serious heating fault damaging some books and periodicals in the main stocks.

Construction works on the new building site, however, were performed in a new community. So a correlation of the functions with those of the world's major libraries assumed great importance. There was the need for rejecting the library decisions typical for the traditional library and for a maximum possible utilization of the opportunities offered by new technologies. The goal was set before a specially established unit - the technology service.

A special emphasis is being placed on Russian libraries and, subsequently, on further research associated with implementation of projects and programs on the federal, i.e. Russian national scale. The relationship of Russian regions and the centre have been far from ideal. The NLR's mission in this context lies in contributing to the search for adequate options of collaboration of federal (central) and regional libraries in Russia, accounting for the interests of regional libraries. Intensive development of initiatives in the fields of coordination and cooperation, examination of international experience in the sphere - these could

make a significant contribution to dealing with the multiple Russian problems unresolved to date.

In focusing on the future in terms of research purposes of the national library, the NLR starts from the historical experience of Russian libraries, duly accounting for the country's traditions and basing on the heritage of Russian regions. It is not at all accidental that it was the NLR that in 1994 held the All-Russian research conference on the history of Russian libraries before 1917. It started an extensive work on utilizing the experience previously not understood, and on interpreting the library history previously falsified.

The promise for the NLR lies in developing the traditions of the Imperial Public Library, the best legacy of the time when the Library's name was the State Public Library. This will govern the extension of its service to Russian and further growth of its contacts with libraries in Europe and the rest of the world.

The unique characteristic of the National Library of Russia is not - and cannot be - reduced to its status. There is a unique, a specific intellectual atmosphere. It originated far back in the early 19th century, when the Director Olenin employed the services of the most outstanding intellectuals of Russia at that time - scholars, authors, translators... The atmosphere has been maintained by his successors today.