

## CONSUMMATE SURVIVORS. RUSSIA'S LIBRARIES TODAY

Guest Editor: Valeriya D. Stelmakh (Moscow)

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## THE DECLINE AND RECONSTRUCTION OF THE RUSSIAN LIBRARY NETWORK

## editorial

The transition from one political epoch to another in Russia represented not only liberation from ideological subjugation and the discovery of a freedom about which we had dreamed so long; it also meant institutional collapse, the destruction of the entire cultural infrastructure. In a moment, Russian culture, so long state-controlled and state-sponsored, was thrown to the arbitrariness of fate and had to fend for itself. It was exactly at that time that the provinces lost their network of clubs, houses of culture, cinemas and many libraries.

Incidentally, the publishing industry was one of the first to put itself onto a commercial footing and undergo rapid development. I remember the surprise which we all experienced when, as if by the wave of a magic wand, instead of the empty bookshops filled with propagandistic rubbish gathering dust we had streets full of book stalls with books, books, books...

However, for the library – under state control, and by nature free of charge and open to all – the transition to the market economy turned out to be much more painful. The slogan of the 1990s ‘Introduce paid services – earn money and take care of yourself!’ pretty much sums up the state and social idiocy with respect to public institutions at that time. Nevertheless, the institution of the library – innately old and conservative, stable and rigid – survived this extended period of transition.

Today, the libraries are open, but they are still experiencing many problems and difficulties. In this issue of *kultura*, we have highlighted just two of them; however, these are the most important, difficult and expensive to solve: support for the small village libraries, which make up the lion’s share of the country’s public library system, and the creation in libraries of resources that would guarantee the population general access to information. These two problems have the highest profes-

sional priority for Russian libraries today. This is where we are hopelessly behind the rest of the civilised world.

There is one more sore point. Paradoxically, despite the appearance of 105,000 new book titles every year in Russia, the libraries and inhabitants of the provinces are, as in the Soviet period, almost completely starved of books. Libraries simply cannot buy the defining works of contemporary literature, those that have won prizes and the recognition of experts, or specialist and academic literature – anything, in short, that is published with a print run of 2–7,000. This is due to the lack of the requisite finances, the collapse of the old centralised system for distributing books and the blockages in the new channels of circulation. The regional book market is flooded with cheap publications belonging to popular culture. The authors of these works have a total annual print run of 10–13 million. Their books have no problems reaching their readers, and appear in libraries all over the country. Objectively, libraries are beginning to promote the most primitive standards of taste; they are moving ever further towards the periphery of literary and academic life.

How can libraries exist and work in such difficult conditions? It is exactly at such times of change and catastrophe, which appear so often in our country’s history, that Russian libraries are needed. For society, they act to preserve the collective memory; for the individual, they are simply a normal place that has always existed, the disappearance of which would leave a void – a place where it is possible to go with the simple and naïve request ‘give me something to read...’.

*Translated from the Russian  
by Christopher Gilley*

BOOK SATURATION AND BOOK STARVATION.  
THE DIFFICULT ROAD TO A MODERN LIBRARY SYSTEM

Valeriya D. Stelmakh

analysis

*The peculiarities of the present state of Russian libraries are bound up with history and post-Soviet cultural politics. The standard of library services is uneven. Local particularities determine the conditions under which libraries in different regions operate. There are six aspects essential to an understanding of what is happening in Russian libraries: the drama of history, cuts in the library network, state laws hindering the development of libraries, the inequality between libraries in the capitals and the provinces, the social status of librarians and the library's increasing cultural role.*

A LITTLE HISTORY

The first libraries on the territory of ancient Rus<sup>1</sup> were created in the 11<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> centuries in monasteries. They preserve the earliest examples of Russian writing. The first public libraries appeared much later, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Three factors in Russian history had a decisive impact on both the formation of our libraries and their present state.

Firstly, the creation of libraries in Russia took place at the initiative (*prikazy*) of those in power – the tsars and the central state institutions. These powers founded the country's oldest academic libraries, the Library of the Academy of Sciences, the Moscow University Library and the Imperial Public Library in St. Petersburg. The network of public libraries in the provinces began to emerge in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. At this point, however, private initiatives and donations also began to play a not inconsiderable role. Thus, by the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup>–20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the library system already embodied the characteristic that defined Russian history – it served the state rather than society.

Secondly, in Russia there always existed a gulf between a small group of large libraries for the educated and well-off and the network of public libraries. There were almost no limits set on the collections of the first type because they possessed a stable source of funds. The second kind, ever since their creation in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup>

century, had largely been shaped by the arbitrary decisions of the local organs of power. They were also subjected to numerous prohibitions, especially the school libraries and public libraries for the common people, which were even forbidden from acquiring some publications that had been passed by the censor.

Thirdly, the formation and development of Russian libraries was not a smooth, linear process. The Bolshevik revolution of 1917 was a cultural catastrophe, a chasm into which the libraries were thrown with the rest of the country. The gigantic libraries of the capitals of St. Petersburg and Moscow and the central libraries in the *gubernias* survived. However, below this level, the network of provincial libraries was practically destroyed. The general campaign for the nationalisation of private collections, the libraries of the churches and landowners, and those belonging to institutions liquidated by the Bolsheviks resulted in the irreplaceable loss of valuable collections and unique publications.

70 years later, the collapse of the Soviet regime constituted a further 'rupture' in the cultural chain; the whole system of cultural institutions and librarianship disintegrated with the regime. Luckily, the network of libraries was by and large preserved thanks to the library community and, surprisingly, the local organs of power. Despite this success, the number of libraries fell and they were almost entirely unable to make new acquisitions during the 1990s. The state, which had taken such a long time setting up its library system and controlled

<sup>1</sup> Kievan Rus, which existed during the 9<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> centuries and had its capital in Kiev, is often seen as the precursor to the Russian state.

## analysis

it so thoroughly, disappeared at the most difficult time for culture, leaving the library network without funds. The libraries in the new Russia are little more than 15 years old. It is true that they retain the Enlightenment tradition of the Russian intelligentsia. However, they never existed under the conditions of a democratic society; they are only now beginning to adopt the slogans of the new ideology – ‘tolerance’, ‘neutrality’ and ‘free access to information for all’, as well as the new ways of working under the new conditions.

In Russia, there are more than 48,000 state libraries open to the public, 66,000 school libraries, 3,000 libraries in institutions of specialised and higher learning, 3,500 academic-technical libraries, 1,500 medical libraries and 379 libraries of the Academy of Sciences.

#### HOW MANY LIBRARIES ARE THERE IN RUSSIA?

Interestingly, no-one can answer this question accurately. Official documents give the number of 130,000 with provisos such as ‘roughly’, ‘according to expert opinions’ and ‘there are no reliable statistics’. The reason for this vagueness is that different ministries, departments, institutions and enterprises throughout the country have their own libraries; tallies have been conducted carelessly if at all. A complete inventory of libraries has not been undertaken since 1934.

The state public libraries, open to everyone (there are more than 48,000 of them), represent the face of Russia’s libraries. Their goal is to provide the country’s population with books. This network exists under the direction of the Ministry of Culture.

Today, there is one public library for every 3,000 inhabitants. However, while libraries are overconcentrated in the capitals and major towns, they are completely absent from those small settlements separated from each other by hundreds of kilometres.

Following the collapse of the Soviet state, it was not only the fundamental network of public libraries that broke down: the disappearance of the Soviet trade unions meant the loss of their well stocked libraries; the scientific-technical libraries closed alongside the loss-making industrial enterprises, and the enormous, valuable collections of the central and local Communist party sections have vanished somewhere...

Even today, the library network has not stabilised. Businesses and commercial enterprises are laying claim to the libraries’ premises because, for example, their buildings are centrally located or prestigious. The local administrations, which are responsible for public libraries, do not think that it is profitable to spend money on the expensive preservation of permanent libraries in areas with low populations and fewer than 10 visitors per day. It is difficult to argue with this. However, the system of mobile libraries (or *peredvizhki* – bookmobiles) created under the Soviet regime has also been destroyed despite the fact that they are essential for a country as large as Russia, with regions that are sparsely populated and difficult to reach. The bookshops in the regions and villages have also disappeared; they are not profitable. As a result, in spite of the impressive-sounding figures on the number of libraries, a considerable portion of the country’s population has been deprived of library services. They find themselves ‘isolated’ from books.

#### THE STATE AND ITS LAWS

Russian libraries are almost all state-owned. This explains the monolithic nature and monotony of the entire library system. The budget, rules of work and ideology are rigidly regulated by the state. The state did not look after ‘its’ libraries during the 1990s. Today, however, its interest has revived and it is jealously guarding its territory, from time to time reminding everyone ‘who the boss is’. For

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example, it has expelled large civic foundations and organisations such as the Soros Foundation,<sup>2</sup> which in the 1990s had supplied libraries with books.

The laws passed by the higher organs of state power (whose legislative work, at the moment, often displays a lack of experience and competence) in most cases do not take the interest of the libraries into account and in fact obstruct their activities. The most recent example of this was a new law on copyright which, among other things, deprived libraries of the right to create electronic copies of documents and transfer printed texts to CDs for the blind. Without these abilities, libraries cannot exist. Before that a number of laws had been adopted that cut back on the number of libraries, raised the cost of buying books for libraries and forbade libraries from participating in the book market. The government also introduced taxes on library collections, making it too expensive to replenish them. It increased duties on books imported from abroad and put an end to the international exchange of books. Moreover, it ended the libraries' privileges when sending books, thereby harming the whole system of book distribution.

In Russia, it is said that the stupidity and severity of our laws are balanced out by the fact that they are sloppily enforced. However, this worldly wisdom does not save our libraries, which are obliged to act within the framework of state law.

Between 2000 and 2007, the number of state libraries open to the public fell by almost 3,000. In only a single year, 2006–7, the number of libraries declined by 733, the number of users by 253,000, the number of publications received by 1,839,000 and the number of library employees by 775.

<sup>2</sup> The American stock market speculator George Soros founded the 'Open Society' foundation in order to promote democracy and civil society. One of its main areas of concern was the creation of new schoolbooks.

## THE CAPITAL AND THE PROVINCES – TWO WORLDS

The phrase 'Moscow is not Russia' refers, of course, not to geography but to the enormous cultural divide between the capital and the provinces, the gulf between the rich, expensive, rapidly developing and increasingly nondescript city and the rest of the country, the provinces. The expressions 'province' and 'provinciality' evoke a number of ideas and connotations in Russia. In this case, we are not saying that provincial culture is second-rate or imitative. However, the divide between the libraries of the capital and those in the provinces is predicated on differences between resources and rights. In effect, the libraries are not merely situated in different countries, but in different cultural worlds.

To give just one, albeit the most important, example – the books! Libraries and readers from the Soviet period got used to the severe shortage of books because book production rarely met readers' demand. However, it is a paradox that today, at a time when censorship has ended, commercial publishers are active and the book market is booming, the same shortage exists in the country, with the exception of Moscow.

Moscow can finance its libraries adequately on account of its huge budget. The money set aside for them considerably exceeds the funding received by all the libraries in one of the enormous federal districts, such as the Far East, the Volga district or Siberia. The acquisition of new publications by provincial public libraries, where the collections are aging, decrepit remnants from the Soviet period, has halved in comparison to 1990. Only 7.6 roubles per citizen are provided to buy books and periodicals, where at least 50 roubles are needed. Despite the fact that more than 15,000 periodicals are published in the country, the average public library can only subscribe to 10–15 journals and 5–8 newspapers; most of these are local publications. Naturally, regions, too, differ greatly with regards to

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the amount they spend on acquisitions. Money is not the only problem, however. The channels of book distribution have also become blocked. With more than 100,000 new publications every year, Russia is one of the world's foremost producers of books. However, around 70% of all books and periodicals appear in Moscow and St. Petersburg and remain there. The delivery of books from Moscow to Vladivostok, for example, costs more than the book itself. For this reason, inter-library loans have died, and with them the ability to order any book from any library in the country. As a result, the Moscow book market is saturated, while my colleague in Vladivostok writes: 'Books! For the love of God, bring books!'.

HOW MUCH DOES A LIBRARIAN COST?

The demands upon librarians are growing. He or she must be a trained specialist, well versed in information technology, with a knowledge of foreign languages and able to cope with the stream of books... There are many things that he or she must be able to do.

However, the employees of public libraries have for a long time been among the most poorly paid workers in the country. They receive on average 3,500 roubles per month (under 100 euros), 2.5 times less than the average rate of pay in Russia. Of course, there are huge differences throughout the country created by the top-up allowance paid by the local administration. In the Astrakhan *oblast*, this is 2,600 roubles; in the Magadan *oblast*, where living conditions are especially difficult, it is 7,900 roubles, and in rich Moscow, it is around 15,000 roubles. However, in each case, whatever the cost of living may be, it is not possible to survive on this money.

For this reason, libraries mainly employ older women who receive a pension and have the right to earn a salary as well. Grumbling about pay and petitions to those in power are two of the main topics of conversation among library workers. However, Russian librarians, who, as in the past, see themselves as state servants, have not yet learned to defend their own interests, and the professional associations are too weak and few in number.



*The Reading Hut. (Izba Chitalnaya). Poster from 1927.  
Caption: Extracurricular Learning Activities in Samara Province.  
Slogan in the Picture: On the 10th Anniversary of the October Revolution – Strengthen The Alliance of Workers and Peasants! With the kind permission of russianposter.ru*

## analysis

Dmitry Ravvinsky, a senior research officer at the Russian National Library in St. Petersburg, wrote to me that: 'During the Soviet period, it was not possible to expect great understanding for the real problems facing librarians. In the opinion of the public, librarians' work was incomprehensible, and basically seemed to be just reading. Consequently, they received a low salary. Nevertheless, the profession of librarian commanded an undoubted moral authority in the Soviet period. The renunciation of a career and material success, embodied in the figure of the humble librarian, inspired respect. In Soviet society, it was not shameful to be a "failure" because all social success was inevitably tied to a series of concessions and moral compromises; it was not disgraceful to be "intelligent but poor". The situation has changed in the post-Soviet era. Today, good pay is more important than how interesting the work is. Good qualifications, education and devotion to work are repaid with a humiliatingly modest salary. Librarians understand their low payment as evidence of society's opinion of them. It is no coincidence that in Russian literature, the figure of the librarian has quickly acquired the characteristics of comical failure'.

RAY'S OF HOPE THROUGH THE LIBRARY'S WINDOW  
Thus, the number of Russian libraries is falling and the circle of registered library users is contracting. However, at the same time, strangely enough, the number of library visitors is increasing! More and more people are coming to public libraries in the Russian provinces, but not for books or periodicals; many of them do not enjoy reading at all. They come for other reasons – to obtain free access to the internet (where it exists, of course) or to receive free legal advice in the centres for legal information created with the support of the Ministry of Culture; sometimes, this is the only option open to residents of remote regions. Here, within the small provincial libraries, a literary map of the locality – city or village – is created, showing residents what in their 'little homeland' is worthy of note and pride. Here, it is possible to display one's pictures or needlework without charge, set up one's clubs or associations, create amateur theatre groups and act out Shakespeare or Chekhov on a home-made stage in gowns sewn together from old cloths. Here, New Year's pine trees are organised for the children, and competitions and quizzes take place. Finally, it is sometimes possible to meet a writer in the flesh if one can find a sponsor-

## LIBRARIES IN THE SOVIET PERIOD

The Bolsheviks created a new network of Soviet libraries in a remarkably short time – 10 years. However, these were different libraries with a different ideology, collections and function. They were isolated from the world-wide community of libraries. It is now fashionable to criticise the Soviet library system, but it was well co-ordinated: the Bolsheviks constructed an expansive network of libraries according to a well defined normative concept; a system of mobile libraries existed as points for dispensing literature in sparsely populated and remote regions; new acquisitions were conducted systematically; an inter-library loan scheme enabled every citizen of the country to order a book from any of the central libraries, and a national repository of books was collected through a law, which no publisher dared ignore, that every book published in the country had to be sent to the central libraries (i.e. following the principle of 'legal deposit'). Of course, the ideological 'ballast' weighing down the libraries' shelves reduced the efficiency of the institutions' work, especially in the years immediately before the collapse of the regime. According to expert assessments, around half of the libraries' literature was never read.

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willing to cover his or her journey from the capital. The opportunities here are many...

In addition, the library draws people as a point of calm in their difficult lives; a place where the doors are open to all, without charge, where it is warm, clean, well lit and quiet, where no foul language is used, no-one drinks or fights, where one can feel that one has something in common with the rest of the reading room, with people with 'another face'. As one visitor to a library in Chelyabinsk *oblast* said, 'here I can see decent people!'. In our post-Perestroika society, where cultural norms and values have been destroyed, such a place is particularly necessary. In the depths of Russia, the library is sometimes the only place where the flame of culture has not been extinguished.

*Translated from the Russian  
by Christopher Gilley*

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in the V.I. Lenin State Library of the USSR. There she set up the Department of the Sociology of Reading and Library Studies and headed the first major nation-wide research in the area. She was responsible for attracting people such as Lev Gudkov and Boris Dubin, who went on to become famous sociologists, to the department. She has been awarded the title of 'Honoured Cultural Worker of the Russian Federation'.

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THE RIGHT TO INFORMATION – A RIGHT THAT CANNOT BE EXERCISED  
THROUGHOUT THE COUNTRY

*Margarita M. Samokhina*

## report

The provision by libraries of free access to information for all regardless of their place of residence is one of the most acute professional and social questions in contemporary Russia. The problem is novel in that only the collapse of the Soviet regime made free access an issue. Before that, the libraries were subjected to severe censorship. The closure to readers of enormous collections, thereby creating special collections or 'libraries within libraries' (the so-called *spetskhrany*), and repeated 'purges' of the bookshelves, i.e. the destruction of 'ideologically harmful' literature, were common prac-

tice, part of the daily routine in the not-so-distant past.

Russia only entered the age of the internet and the electronic information highway after the fall of the regime. It is therefore hardly surprising that the number of people using the internet in Russia is not very high despite rapid growth, especially among the young. However, libraries have not even been able to reach the level of domestic use, which is still very far behind the rest of Europe. Among public libraries, only 29% have telephones, 17% own computers, 2% possess fax



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machines, and about 9% provide internet access. In addition, only 4% of the academic and public libraries under the Ministry of Culture have set up electronic catalogues.

This information is a rough projection for the whole country because exact statistics on libraries do not exist. It gives a general picture but does not reflect the state of affairs in every region or city: there are enormous gaps between large and small libraries, between those in the two capitals (Moscow and St. Petersburg) and those in the provinces, and between those in the different *oblasts* and republics. Indeed, all of the central academic and university federal and regional libraries are computerised. Here, of course, there is access to the internet, fax machines and e-mail are in use, existing collections have been digitalised, electronic databases created and electronic catalogues set up.

According to a poll carried out by the Levada Centre, Moscow, in 2008:

- 28% of respondents have a computer at home
- 25% use the internet
- 20% use e-mail
- 71% possess a mobile telephone

However, not every Russian citizen can take advantage of his or her right to retrieve the information contained in these large libraries. For someone living far from a city, in areas that sometimes even lack telephones or mobile phone networks, the ability to use the internet and receive free access to information is only hypothetical (although it should still not be underestimated, given its complete absence under the Soviet Union). The lower a library's status – in districts, small towns, settlements, villages and schools – the worse the situation is. Only 3% of village libraries and not more than 10% of the small public libraries at the regional level have internet access.

The situation facing libraries in the different parts of Russia varies. Of course, the overwhelming majority of libraries (between 76% and 82%) in the seven federal districts are not computerised. However, there are more advanced regions where the number of modern libraries compares favourably to the general picture. These divergences have emerged for a number of different reasons: in rich cities or regions – such as Moscow and St. Petersburg, or Yakutiya with its oil, gold and diamond reserves – the local administration is naturally able to better finance libraries. However, much depends on their relationships with the local government, which, given the almost complete lack of public control, single-handedly decides the libraries' fates. One of the clearest examples of the impact that single personalities have on the quality of libraries can be seen in the Chuvash Republic. Here, the president has actively supported and financed projects to provide 'small' libraries with internet access. As a result, the republic boasts a higher rate of computer use and access to the internet than the average in the rest of the country.

The pace of connecting libraries to the internet, which would guarantee free access to information for everyone, remains very slow. This is above all due to the lack of sufficient state funds and means of communication in many regions in the 'depths' of Russia. Significant investment in this area is sporadic; the only projects worth mentioning include one initiated by the non-profit organisation *Otkrytaya Rossiya* ('Open Russia')<sup>1</sup> and another undertaken by the electric power company *RAO EES Rossiya* ('Unified Energy System of Russia'). The small investment by local companies for the purchase of computers, for example, has not brought about significant change.

*LIBNET*, the state-financed programme throughout Russia, envisages the creation of a information-

<sup>1</sup> A foundation set up by the former head of YUKOS, Mikhail Khodorkovsky; it has since been dissolved.

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library network guaranteeing citizens free access to all the resources of Russian and foreign libraries, the establishment of a consolidated electronic catalogue for all of Russia's libraries, a national electronic library and the conversion of collections into a digital format. However, those using and taking part in it are in the main libraries of the large cities, or the academic and university libraries, where the situation is not too bad. The programme has already existed for more than 10 years.

Despite this, even the most optimistic estimations predict that it will take several decades to computerise all Russian libraries and achieve the general goal of opening the world of information and culture to every resident of the country...

*Translated from the Russian  
by Christopher Gilley*

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Margarita M. Samokhina holds a doctorate in sociology and has specialised in the sociology of libraries and reading. She heads the Research Department at the Russian State Youth Library in Moscow.

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MANY REASONS FOR VISITING THE LIBRARY.  
A GLANCE AT THE YEKATERINBURG REGIONAL LIBRARY

*Valentina P. Zhivaeva*

## portrait

Two young women and a somewhat older man are chatting in the reading room. Alexander is the dean of one of the universities in Yekaterinburg, Olga is one of his students and Nadia came to the library to visit the opening of an exhibition of works by an artist she knows.

'I'm not a registered reader', says Nadia, 'but I once came here for an exhibition dedicated to Pushkin of menus and souvenirs, and now I am always "popping in" to the library. It's so impressive here!'. She looks at the reading room's pillars and wooden panels with respect.

'It's not old at all, an imitation', clarifies Alexander. 'The building was built in the 1950s. Before that, the library changed its address four times; the first, the historical building, has not been preserved'. Twenty years ago – he even remembers the table – he and his friends wrote their dissertations here. In the breaks they took turns reading

Nabokov's recently published *Lolita*; at that time, it could not be found anywhere else! Today, his university's library is by no means worse, but he is still drawn to Belinka. Coming here is not simply a journey a few years back in time. It means 'slipping into' an entirely different way of life – freer, more measured and peaceful; it is one of the few main places in the city where an intellectual atmosphere has been conserved.

Olga is silent. She did not come for conversation or because of the atmosphere. She only wants to work. And not everything in the library is conducive to this... She has to wait half an hour while her book is fetched from the store. Alexander is even worse off; the book he needed is being used by another reader.

'What?' exclaims Nadia in surprise. 'Was it really the only book in the whole of this enormous library?'

portrait

'It is a rather rare publication from the 1920s – the only copy in the whole city'.

'It might be possible to search in the internet, on one of the full-text sites', suggests Olga.

'It would be possible, of course', agrees her dean, 'but all the same I trust paper books more'.

His interlocutors smile politely. They find it difficult to understand their elders' romanticism towards books.

The group of three does not suspect that it is typical of our library's readers. For every man there are two women. This man, as a rule, has normally completed his education, while the women are still working on their degrees. The great majority of our readers are students, among whom women also outnumber men. For every one pensioner visiting the library there are 10 workers or schoolchildren. Our library, which has a good

'BELINKA'

Belinka is the affectionate term used by readers and librarians for the Public and Scientific Library of the Sverdlovsk Region in Yekaterinburg. The library is a two-storey building of 1,400 square metres. It has a collection of 2,180,000 works. Every day, there are from 500 to 1,000 visitors. Each reader borrows 5 volumes on average. The library possesses 215 computers, of which 55 are for the readers' use.

reputation, was not always open to everyone. For many years, we placed restrictions on the admission of schoolchildren and first- and second-year students. We did not need the influx of new readers. Today, anyone can become a member of the library. There is, of course, no charge. In fact, a different problem has arisen: the number of registered readers is falling steadily. As before, there are many visitors – from 500 to 1,000 people per day. They are attracted by the size of our collections and our 'book-connected' projects.

We do not like to rid ourselves recklessly of the seemingly outdated books and deprive people of the joy of unexpected discoveries. Our walls house a collection that is unique in the Urals, containing everything: handwritten texts and books pre-dating the eighteenth century, foreign publications from the seventeenth century and eighteenth-cen-

tury Russian books, books from the private collections of Ural factory owners, rare pre-revolutionary publications of sheet music, unique periodicals, posters and postcards from the Soviet period, brochures on the struggle against tuberculosis in the early years of Soviet power, propaganda pamphlets from the Second World War and manuscripts, to name but a few.

Our exhibitions have covered, for example, ABC books and primers, sweet wrappers and labels related to literary themes, comics (which have only recently become available to a wider audience),

detective novels and the Soviet 'coffee table' editions of the 1920s–1940s. We try to find an unusual perspective on discovering books. We do not assume that our visitors are experienced readers. For us, the important thing is that our exhibits can potentially provide

fodder for discussion between a university professor and an inquisitive person from the street.

Unfortunately, however, we are finding it increasingly difficult to meet the needs of those who have always viewed Belinka as their own – for the 'real' readers, for the academics. What are the reasons for this?

Firstly, because of a lack of funds and an insufficiently flexible acquisitions system, books which are important today appear, at best, in the library tomorrow. Secondly, every year, the library receives 0.6 books/journals per reader; really, the minimum should be double this figure. On top of this, the waiting time for books from the stores is about 30 minutes to one hour and there is not enough space in the reading rooms. There are also not enough computers for those wanting them. Although internet access is free, a time limit is set

## portrait

on it. At the moment, we cannot offer electronic versions of books, journals and newspapers. Lastly, readers cannot photocopy texts themselves. This is done by the library's employees, who only have two heavy-duty photocopiers and one colour copier at their disposal.

\*

...They meet again... Olga is unhappy about today's visit to the library. She is vexed by the queues and the cost of copying documents, the slowness with which her order was carried out and the fact that her books were handed out in three different parts of the library. In the rare books section she still could not use the book that she needed; it was

sent off to be restored six months ago. When she inquired when an electronic copy would be made, she received a look of pity as an answer. Moreover, she could not find the new monograph in her specialist area. It has, however, already appeared in the bookshops; she will have to buy it...

*Translated from the Russian  
by Christopher Gilley*

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Valentina P. Zhivaeva, a trained philologist, heads the Cultural Centre in the Public and Universal Scientific Library of the Sverdlovsk Region.



*The Yekaterinburg Regional Library organises various campaigns to encourage more people to find their way to its treasures. Photo: Valentina P. Zhivaeva*

### THE CITY OF YEKATERINBURG

Yekaterinburg is one of the main industrial centres in the Urals – a dynamic, developing and contradictory city with a population of 1,334,000. 40,000 of these are registered readers at the Public and Scientific Library of the Sverdlovsk Region. It was founded in 1899 and as such is one of the oldest and most respected libraries in Russia. The library is named after Vissarion Belinsky – the popular literary critic and democrat from the first half of the nineteenth century.

VILLAGES WITHOUT ACCESS ROADS AND LIBRARIES WITHOUT TELEPHONES:  
RURAL LIBRARIES IN RUSSIA

Yuliya P. Melentyeva

analysis

BY WAY OF AN INTRODUCTION

*Tatyana Nikolayevna is sitting underneath a 'Books are Your Best Friends' poster and shivers from the cold. The library has not been heated for a long time – and why, indeed? The large, two-storey building, which once housed the village Soviet, is now only used for the library and the first-aid clinic. Do you really expect the boiler to be repaired for just two rooms? She is therefore doing 'warming gymnastics': raising and lowering her legs under the table. She is never given the chance to leave the desk; the readers would curse her. Auntie Valya threatened to do just that: 'Oh, Tanka, if you don't open the library on Friday, I will curse you'. Auntie Valya is now finishing off 'The Lady and the Bandit' and already has her eyes on 'The Dragon and the Pearl'; she mustn't be slowed down... The village Krasnaya Dubrava has 360 inhabitants, of whom 328 are regular visitors to the library. Thus, Tatyana Nikolayevna cannot leave her post under any circumstances.'*<sup>1</sup>

THE RURAL LIBRARY AS REFLECTED IN STATISTICS

Russia has always been seen as a peasant country in which the overwhelming majority of the population lived in villages and where illiteracy was almost universal. Rural libraries appeared somewhat late in Russia, in the middle of the nineteenth century, thanks to the efforts of educated people, charitable organisations and Russian writers such as Lev Tolstoy, Fedor Dostoevsky and Ivan Turgenev. The history of the development of rural libraries is also bound up with the names of progressive pedagogues, educators and publicists such as Ivan Sytin, Fedor Pavlenkov and Petr Makushin.

Following the October Revolution in 1917, the literacy campaigns, alongside the collectivisation and mechanisation of agriculture, transformed the

nature of work and education in the Russian village. At the same time, famine and the development of industry drove large segments of the population into the cities. The great 'second' wave of industrialisation in the 1970s led to a fateful mass exodus. If you travel along Russia's main motorways, you can still see chains of abandoned villages with ruined houses.

In 1915 (shortly before the October Revolution), there were about 25,000 rural libraries in Russia; today, there are 36,000. They represent 75% of the public libraries.

Nonetheless, almost every fourth resident of the country today lives in a village. For villagers, the library is potentially the only source of culture and information. In practice, only about half of the rural population use them. This is not merely due to a lack of education, the drudgery of agricultural work or the absence of a habit of reading; nearly 25% of villages in fact lack a library or other form of library service.

Russia has a number of geographical particularities: the large number of remote regions, the great distance between settlements, the lack of roads (41,000 out of 153,000 village communities are not connected to the road system), an incomplete telephone network and areas that have problems receiving mobile phone or television signals. The former system of mobile libraries ('bookmobiles') – the importance of which it is almost impossible to exaggerate – also collapsed in the 1990s. A new one will only be created in the future. At the moment, only Volgograd has a modern mobile library-information centre. This is thanks to the active support of Volgograd's local government. However, it remains an exemplary model for the whole country...

The post-Soviet period has been characterised by

<sup>1</sup> N. Radulova. *Dnem – butylka, nochyu – knizhka* (By day, a bottle; at night, a book), <http://www.ogoniok.com/5029/25>

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the collapse of the entire cultural infrastructure. Cuts within the library system have generally taken place at the expense of the rural libraries, which the local administrations have closed as 'unprofitable' or merged with other institutions. On average, rural libraries receive a tenth of the funding available to their urban equivalents.

The typical rural library can be characterised thus: it consists of one or two rooms in an urban-style building with gas heating (in large villages or regional centres) or a log house with a stove (in villages); it has a collection of 5–6,000 books, mostly acquired during the Soviet period, and which for this reason are hopelessly outdated (with the exception of the literary classics, of course, with which all libraries are well stocked). As a result of the poor heating in the 1990s, when libraries were almost entirely deprived of funds, the greater part of their collections were damaged. There are 5–8 subscriptions to periodicals – of these only 1 or 2 are for national publications; the rest are local. On the whole, there are no faxes or computers – and no internet access; there is only, at best, a telephone. Almost no audio-visual equipment or electronic publications are available. Rural libraries usually employ one person, who is paid an average salary of about 3,300 roubles (roughly 85 euros). In many regions, the librarian receives a small additional allowance from the local administration based on length of service, overtime worked on Sundays and public holidays or for cleaning the library.

This picture is revealing. The gulf between the capital and the provinces, as well as between the city and the village, has acquired dangerous proportions; readers in the village are, at the end of the day, isolated from information; they have no access to serious contemporary writing. Here, as in the past, the 'in' writers are those from 20 or 30 years ago; the alternative is the second-rate romance novels or detective stories that have recently flooded the Russian book market – literary pulp. As one

rural librarian put it, '20 years without heating has destroyed the whole collection. In general, our thoughts have become beggarly...'

The variations between the regions and *oblasts* are enormous; it is difficult to compare the libraries in different parts of the country – the same is true of large settlements and small villages (with 40–200 inhabitants). For example, in the Southern Federal District, 17% of the libraries operate under poor conditions in old, run-down buildings; in the North-Western District, this figure is only 4%. In the Siberian District, libraries typically buy about 26 books for every 100 inhabitants each year; in the Southern District, they only acquire 11. This is the origin of the contradictory assessments of the rural library: some people label them as mediocre, beggarly and of no use to anyone; others lavish them with praise and enthusiasm. And, as strange as it may seem, both judgments are correct.

## WHAT NOW?

In the 1990s, there was a stormy discussion about the fate of the Russian village. Sociologists and economists went so far as to claim that the village, and with it, the rural library, did not have a future. The community of librarians begged to differ, recalling the fact that around 40 million people lived in villages and that rural libraries recorded about 190 million visits per year.

Recently, professional forums devoted to the defence of the rural library have been held throughout the country. The first congress of Russia's rural librarians took place in Bryansk in 2000, and a section for rural libraries was formed within the Russian Library Association to bring together specialists in the area.

The intensity of the discussion and topicality of the matter can be seen in the fact that 15,326 websites address the problem, and the phrase 'rural library' can be found in 145,133 different on-line documents.

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The first major initiative in support of the rural libraries began at the beginning of this decade with the joint programme organised by the 'Open Russia' foundation of M.B. Khodorkovsky and the Russian Ministry for Culture. It envisaged the organisation of model libraries in villages. They would ensure the minimum conditions and resources needed by a modern library: a separate, well equipped building, effective security, a telephone, computers and internet access, a fax machine, a photocopier, equipment to play music and video, and new office furniture. Every library received a collection of good new books (about 2,000) and even a set of electronic publications. The foundation was able to set up about 80 such libraries, and it had planned to open

another 250. However, the project was, for the reasons known, abandoned. The new libraries are still in service, but they operate under the standard conditions without special sponsorship.

The 'Open Russia' project was not unique. At the same time (2001), the non-profit organisation 'Pushkin's Library' developed the 'Rural Library' programme. This foundation is one of the most respected and active public library foundations in Russia. Today, it is the main force implementing the state programme for creating model rural libraries. The government has recognised the funding of rural libraries as a priority of cultural politics.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> State Directive on 'Model Village Libraries' within the framework of the Targeted Federal Programme 'The Culture of Russia' (2006–2010).

The ultimate aim of this project is to modernise two hundred rural libraries over the period 2006–2010; but what does this mean and who pays for it?

The local government pays for the restoration and external appearance of the premises, setting up security measures, connection to the telephone lines and internet, and the acquisition of office furniture.



*Tatyana Nikolayevna shivers from the cold...* Photo from *Ogonyok*, 1–2/2008. <http://www.ogoniok.com/5029/25>

The federal budget pays for the purchase of computers with monitors, operating systems and other software, multi-functional equipment (a combined printer, scanner, photocopier and fax machine), a modem, office supplies, 1,000 recent books on different subjects and 200 CDs.

85 regions have already taken part in the project. Rural libraries have received more than 50,000 specially selected sets of books, representing more than 6.5 million individual volumes. These have become the core of the libraries' collections. Over the next few years, a project will be launched to fund and create mobile libraries for the sparsely populated and remote regions.

Another important aspect of this programme is the training of rural librarians. This is essential

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given that only 20% of rural librarians have completed tertiary education, most librarians are older women, there is rarely even one computer in the village, and rural librarians have usually seen the internet 'in action' only during trips to the town or regional centre.

7% of rural libraries are in a state of complete disrepair or in need of serious renovation. About 16% have telephones, 1% boast fax machines, 9% possess computers, 3.5% are equipped with e-mail and 4% with internet access.

A striking example of the implementation of the project 'Model Rural Libraries' can be found in the Chuvash Republic. It is one of the few regions which did not allow rural libraries to close during the 1990s. Today, model rural libraries are opening there all over the place. They are the most modern and attractive institutions in the village. They boast gas heating and an easily accessible entrance with attractive signs and intelligent advertisements. The government of the republic has paid for each library to receive 1–2 computers, compact discs, video cassettes, books and internet access.... Chuvash children and villagers can even take virtual tours of the Hermitage and the Louvre.

We are at the beginning of the difficult, colossal and expensive task of dragging both the old 'backward' libraries, which replicate the patterns of the Soviet period, and the rural population out of the cultural void, out of neglect and forget, out

of being the shame of the nation. The rural library is little known beyond its local area; however, it is no less important for Russia than the country's grand libraries in the capitals.

## BY WAY OF A CONCLUSION

*Tatyana Nikolayevna often makes house calls with the nurse: one measures blood pressure, the other offers books. Is there any other way?... Kursk oblast declared 2007 the Year of the Library. Krasnaya Dubrava will not win this year; the cold pipes got in the way, but everyone knows the library anyway.... When Tatyana Nikolayeva walks through the village everyone greets her. Even Volodka the alcoholic doffs his cap.... In Krasnaya Dubrava, as in many other Russian villages, people drink. But they also read'.<sup>3</sup>*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Professor Yuliya P. Melentyeva holds a doctorate in pedagogy and heads a department in the Scientific Centre for Research on the History of Book Culture, Moscow.

## READING SUGGESTION:

Youth Services in Russian Libraries in an Era of Social Change //Libraries and Culture. Austin: University of Texas Press, Vol. 33, N1, 1998, pp. 69–75.

<sup>3</sup> N. Radulova. *Dnem – butylka, nochyu – knizhka* (By day, a bottle; at night, a book), <http://www.ogoniok.com/5029/25>

## PREVIEW:

*kultura* 5-2008 will appear in late October and will deal with new conceptions of childhood in today's Russia.

Christine Götz, Hamburg, will be the guest editor.



HELP AND SUPPORT – NEIGHBOURLINESS – A WINDOW ON THE WORLD.  
THREE OF THE BEST VILLAGE LIBRARIES IN BRYANSK OBLAST

Olga Yu. Kulikova

sketches

SKETCH ONE. 'HELP AND SUPPORT'

The library in the village of Domanichi is one of the oldest in Bryansk *oblast*. It opened in 1897. Nothing has been preserved from that time except for the information carefully collected and recorded in the village chronicle kept by the librarian Liliana Golovchenko. The library is in a separate building, in the centre of the village. It is 96 square metres in size and has gas heating. It subscribes to 9 periodicals (3 newspapers and 6 journals) and receives 158 new books each year. It has one computer with internet access. Liliana's wage is 5,762 roubles.

Modern Domanichi is a village in which 60% of the inhabitants have been resettled from areas affected by the Chernobyl disaster. In addition, there are many refugees from the former republics of the USSR, immigrants. For many,

the resettlement represented a deep psychological trauma that was further exacerbated by social problems. The village librarian, an immigrant herself, understands very well the necessity of finding one's feet in a new place. She 'opens up' people to the world and 'opens up' the world to people.

The census shows that the residents of Domanichi are the best educated among the area's villages. For this reason, the library represents to them a

place to 'meet' new books and interesting people to talk to; it is a creative laboratory and art gallery. Moreover, it is a real aid in solving daily problems, such as finding work or training courses, choosing a profession that is in demand on the market, or getting information about social privileges and services. Here is just one little example: the pensioner A. Puzanov is a talented and

original artist. His first pictures were hung in the village library, then in the area's central library, and after that appeared in his own solo exhibitions in museums of local history and literature. The village artist became famous thanks to the little library in Domanichi.



*'If you do not read books, you will soon forget how to read and write.'* Photo of a poster from Russia (no information on its source or date).

SKETCH TWO.

'NEIGHBOURLINESS' Churovichi is an old, uniquely situated Old Believers' village. It is at the southernmost point

of Bryansk *oblast*, where the borders of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus meet. The library is housed in a separate building in the centre of the village. It is 200 square metres in size and has gas heating. It subscribes to 7 periodicals (3 newspapers and 4 journals) and each year receives 101 new books. It has a computer. The librarian, Valentina Gridina, is paid a salary of 7,000 roubles.

Here, talk of international cooperation and toler-

## sketches

ance are not fashionable commonplaces but part of the library's daily life, giving the villagers a positive image of their 'neighbours'. Constant practical and creative contact takes place between the libraries on all sides of the border. In addition, Churovichi is famous for its cucumbers far beyond Bryansk *oblast*. The village is known as the 'cucumber republic'. For this reason, the library has a humorous 'cucumber' coat of arms and an album where year after year an 'Ode to Churovichi's Cucumbers' is written, and a traditional play about cucumbers is performed by readers.

## SKETCH THREE. 'A WINDOW ON THE WORLD'

The library in the small village of Ryabchi is located in the town's House of Culture. It is gas heated and 180 square metres in size. It subscribes to 11 periodicals (7 newspapers and 4 journals) and in 2007 received 186 new books. It has two computers, a scanner, a photocopier and internet access. The librarian earns (including additional allowances) 6,016 roubles.

By chance, the library became a participant in the project on the 'Creation of Public Computer Libraries in Rural Areas'. This event transformed the once quiet and measured life of the village. The whole world was opened up to the villagers. As a result, two women from the village created their own website: <http://www.nadin368.narod.ru>.

The first information placed on the site dealt with

the unveiling of the computers in the village library. The site's guest book is a kaleidoscope of advice, suggestions, new 'discoveries' and simply kind words: 'Dear creators of this wonderful website! I have wanted to see my native land in the internet for a long time. We also have something to show, and there are nice people here, just as there are at your place'.

\*

Three short stories..., but behind them are commitment, openness and the desire to fill one's own life and the lives of one's neighbours with meaning. One of our best contemporary writers, Aleksey Slapovsky, wrote: 'Perhaps only 5% of the population are serious readers. But even if it were only 1%, in our country that would be almost one and a half a million people! This is the brain of the country, its intellectual potential, which we have long known to be more important than any black earth or oil deposits. The intellectual health of the country depends on these people'.

*Translated from the Russian*

*by Christopher Gilley*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Olga Yu. Kulikova is deputy director of the Fedor Tyutchev Scientific Universal *Oblast* Library in Bryansk.