

# WHITHER RUSSIA?

THE ROLE OF LIBRARIES  
IN THE TRANSFORMATION  
OF A SOCIETY

Tenth Annual  
Mortenson Distinguished  
Lecture

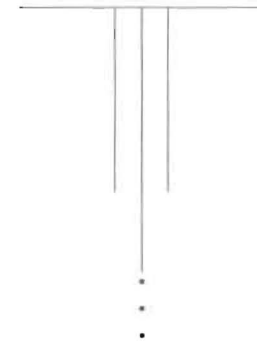


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## INTRODUCTION

Ekaterina Genieva has never been afraid to pursue unpopular topics. As a student at Moscow State University in the early 1970s she wrote her dissertation on James Joyce's *Ulysses*, then banned in the Soviet Union. She has spent nearly three decades at the Library for Foreign Literature in Moscow, a safe haven in Soviet times for intellectuals forbidden to work elsewhere. A religious believer, she supported the liberal priest, Father Alexander Men, until his murder (almost certainly by the KGB) in 1990 and has memorialized him with international conferences and publications each year since his death. She mounted exhibitions on anti-Semitism and other uncomfortable subjects, and during the coup attempt of August, 1991, she defied the KGB and made the Library's printing press available to publish banned newspapers.

In the years since the fall of the Soviet Union Dr. Genieva has emerged as director of what is arguably the most active library in Russia, the Library for Foreign Literature in Moscow, and as one of the leaders of cultural reform. She serves on President Yeltsin's Council for Culture and Arts. Perhaps her most visible post is president of the Soros Foundation in Russia (Open Society Institute), which has distributed hundreds of millions of dollars under her leadership.

— Marianna Tax Choldin  
Director, Mortenson Center for  
International Library Programs and  
Mortenson Distinguished Professor



# WHITHER RUSSIA?

## THE ROLE OF LIBRARIES IN THE TRANSFORMATION OF A SOCIETY

EKATERINA GENIEVA

At times it is difficult to realize what a great epoch we live in. There are two hallmarks to this epoch.

First, it is the end of the second millennium of the world's history. This, like any significant boundary, is being sensed by all cultures as a developmental milestone of human civilization. At the same time it is the eve, the beginning of a new epoch. "The beginning and the end of any epoch are usually marked by cataclysms undermining the existing order of things." This rule is being supported by the passing decade of the 20th century. Thus, the other hallmark of our epoch is global restructuring of the world, including new geopolitics and the demise of the tremendously powerful Soviet regime, that had always fueled the political and ideological grudges between the "free" and the "totalitarian" societies. Both these factors, being acutely sensed by Russia, modulate its deeds and aspirations.

What meaning does the turn of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st have for us? A flare of international terrorism? Infestation of drugs? Corruption scandals? Kosovo libraries wiped away from the earth? Or, maybe the ruined Berlin wall? Economy restructuring? Technological breakthrough? Crossing boundaries into the Internet?

What is the role of spirituality, culture, and libraries in this weird and tragic, but magnificent, epoch? In my talk I'll attempt to summarize the developments in the Russian library community for the past 10 years. Allow me to deviate from the usual report format of itemization of achievements and prospects. I would like to try and uncover the intrinsic processes—what is really happening and why such peaceful institutions as libraries have become the force propelling the whole society ahead. Let me remind you that under the Soviet regime, libraries were deliberately swept to a remote dusty corner. How do we explain this enigma?



I'll begin by referring to my personal experience, not because it is unique, but because it is typical and should therefore convey the intimate feel of this issue.

In the late '80s Russia set foot on the path of changes. In my life, this raised a question: ought I participate in this process, and by doing so conscientiously undermine a stable and self-sufficient professional career as a philologist—a specialist in English and Irish literature—in Joyce's works? Books have always been a natural ingredient of my life—a source for research, a hobby, and by no means “stocks,” or even worse, “information resources.” What made me—not a librarian by education—become the head of a library? What captivated me?

The truth is that four persons I was personally involved with influenced my choice. Their extraordinary lives symbolize the profound motions of the Russian consciousness and history. It is, above all, Father Alexander Men whose personality is intimately associated with the agonizing and tragic ascent to the tolerance of faith and ecumenism in Russia. It is Dmitry Sakharov who strove for human rights and civic society in Russia. It is certainly Dmitry Sergeyevich Likhachev, who has just passed away, whose whole life had been dedicated to Russian culture. He clearly understood the role of libraries in the spiritual maturation of the country. Another brilliant person is Margarita Ivanovna Rudomino, the founder of the library I am currently heading. She conceived it as a novel type of library—an international cultural center—and even in those days she managed to make it a reality.

All these people passed away in the past decade having realized their destinies in full. They left a heritage behind, and an unobtrusive but binding will that says: “Not the burden of responsibility but the philosophy of responsibility.” Responsibility for the society, culture, and libraries. One may resent understanding it, but neglecting it is always associated with the loss of essential ingredients in one's personality.

What is the meaning of the word “library” in the new Russia, and what does it have to look like? This question was asked by many in the early '90s. In our library we first did away with the “special depository,” and then began building new reading halls and cultural centers, adapting new technologies, and developing international contacts.

Special depositories represent not just a relic of the totalitarian epoch, they were a concept of the library community. These incorporated “elite” studies



discriminating between “clean” and “unclean” readers, the cult of a “peaceful backwater” preserved for “large foreheads.” In short, it was a tool of a closed society to hamper public access to information.

The movement from special depositories to open stocks affected absolutely all Russian libraries. Moreover, many communist party administrative libraries were closed and books were transferred to archives. Apart from “ideologically unreliable works,” a lot of “trophy literature” was found in the closed stocks that had ended up in Russian libraries during and after World War II. This immediately raised the everburning issue of cultural values, causing fierce battles in the Duma that unfortunately have not yet been ultimately settled.

In this regard the standpoint of libraries was simple: knowledge should never be closed, and if there is no means to return the books to their owners, all trophy stocks should at least be inventoried, catalogued and opened to the public. Accordingly, the All-Russia Library for Foreign Literature launched an exposition and issuing of a modest printed catalogue that included the Dutch trophy editions from the library's rare book collections. Subsequently, in collaboration with the International Coordination Center of seven countries for the return of cultural treasures in Magdeburg, Germany, the All-Russia Library for Foreign Literature initiated the publishing of *Spoils of War*, a specialized journal on trophy items. Now this publication is available at the All-Russia Library for Foreign Literature website in both Russian and English, and is being disseminated among libraries free of charge. Many other libraries followed suit. For example, part of the famous book collection from the Hungarian Sárospatak College that had ended up among trophy collections of a Nizhny Novgorod regional library was inventoried by the library personnel.

Eradication of special depositories raised yet another serious concern. Library stocks appeared to be stuffed with myriad copies of “morally outdated” and “ideological” literature. Libraries had to get rid of those fast. Such historical documents of the epoch are being retained only in specialized libraries and archives. This literature is no longer the object of mass obligatory reading.

New acquisition has become an immediate priority. Readers—the agents of our crucial epoch—desperately needed books on law, economics, ecology, management, electronics and computer technologies, and language teaching courses and textbooks. This new demand has strongly reshaped the publishing business in Russia—new publishing complexes emerged while the old ones altered their profiles. The '90s have been marked by a complete shifting of



standards—everything of demand is being published, including inevitable nuisances like *Mein Kampf* and low-grade mass products.

However at this point funding deficiency became a problem. Restructuring of economic relations in the country had affected both the industrial sphere and the fringe sector. Spheres that had always enjoyed governmental support painfully sensed its gradual and irreversible shrinkage. Since the early '90s, many Russian libraries no longer had the funds to buy books and periodicals and found themselves struggling for survival by their own means—yet they did survive.

It would be fair to say that the total number of libraries in Russia has only slightly decreased in all the years of economic reform. Administrative libraries carrying mainly communist literature and trade-union reading halls had indeed ceased existing. Some small rural and municipal libraries were also closed with their assets merged into the larger regional libraries. At the same time, new libraries were built, mainly in the provinces, thus making up the total number. Today Russia has 52,177 libraries. Using library services per capita indices, this number continues to be greater than in such countries as France, Germany, and the United States.

How did libraries manage to replenish and even enrich their collections? In the first place, a new form of international book circulation had begun, along with library book exchanges, with reserve and exchange stocks. In the mid-90s these stocks ceased existing when the duplicate books that constituted their main assets migrated to depositories of individual, primarily regional libraries. Secondly, the so-called "Book Aid" had been initiated. I recall the time when our library was the first in Russia to get a somewhat unusual offer from British and American publishing companies to launch a vaguely perceived "book dissemination" project in Moscow. Honestly, not all of those books were among our top priorities, but they were books nevertheless, as well as a palpable experience of new activities. This project helped establish new relationships between Russia and foreign publishing agencies. In those days of hardship, the new partners offered handsome discounts for the literature our libraries were purchasing. At first, this partnership involved only small publishers, like Media Participation (Belgium), YMCA-Press (France), and The Russian Idea (France). Later on, such European giants as Springer Verlag joined in.

At present, book dissemination has ascended to an essentially new level thanks to charitable foundations such as the Open Society Institute (OSI), the



Russian Foundation for Basic Research, and others. These organizations are striving to set up favorable literature acquisition terms and engage the authorities—i.e. federal and local governments—to equally foot the bills. These measures are helping to revive the system of library state support, by compelling the authorities to learn not only how to take but also how to give. An example of such policy is the megaproject "Pushkin Library." This project's duration is planned to be three years. It carries the support of 100 million dollars, provided by the Open Society Institute. Publishing competitions with 1,000 book editions each are held every six months. The main goal of the project is dissemination of these editions to 5,500 of the most peripheral Russian libraries, including those of villages, schools and reformatories.

Species of acquired literature have also begun varying, by incorporating stocks based on electronic carriers. For example, the latest collaborative effort among the OSI, Russian libraries, and EBSCO—one of the leading disseminator firms—was focused on acquisition of both printed and electronic versions of documents and setting up access to on-line information depositories. Accordingly, in 1999–2000, EBSCO will offer every interested Russian library access to more than 15,000 periodicals in various languages, quite importantly, including Russian.

Adapting new technologies has also become a priority. The cooperation with EBSCO is an example of the quality information services offered by Russian libraries today. It should be pointed out that automation of library processes and mastering of information technologies had never been a priority in Russia. This was due in part to the immature telecommunications infrastructure Russia has had until recently. The other factor here is a certain degree of professional conservatism: servicing readers by traditional methods had been a subject of special pride for librarians. Lack of computers and electronic catalogues had not been viewed as backwardness. Rather, it had been a welcome delay in depersonalization of live librarian's work based on person-to-person interactions with readers.

This issue rigidly emerged only with cessation of regular investments and a need to fill the lacunae in library assets with additional sources of information. Generally speaking, none of the world's libraries, even those with a stable acquisition budget, can boast perfectly complete collections. A natural solution here is to join efforts, cooperate, share resources, and open one another's access to them. Being motivated by this goal, Russian libraries set



out to work in this direction. The main hindrance they encountered on this path was that the information networks, which provided services to foreign libraries, appeared to be based on initial stage automation in each individual library. Bridging this gap was a tough task, and even now the Internet and its services—i.e. foreign ready-to-use information resources—continue being more accessible and popular at many Russian libraries as compared to local bibliographic data generation and networks.

However, regardless of all the obstacles, the work has begun. In the past 10 years many Russian libraries have automated cataloguing procedures and started building electronic catalogues. They have accumulated some experience in electronic document delivery with the use of telecommunications technologies. Hundreds of libraries have gained access to the Internet via commuted and individual channels, and they presented themselves to the information world with their individual Web servers. Merging library catalogues into corporate systems and electronic library development is on the agenda today. The first experience of such supported integration, namely, by the OSI in the framework of the Pushkin Library Megaproject, is underway. The latest All-Russian competition selected seven participants willing to develop regional library networks. These networks will follow open system standards, namely, the international formats of data exchange, the latest telecommunications protocols and means of information search (Protocol Z39.50). The next step will be corporate cataloguing, retroconversion of stocks, and creation of large regional centers of information library services. Until recently, Russian libraries have relied on services provided by foreign news agencies such as OCLC and MEDLINE. Soon they and their foreign colleagues will be able to receive notes from the Russian Book Chamber and the largest regional cataloguing centers.

Naturally, the breakthrough in this field is of tremendous importance, however, new technologies represent just a means to access information. Therefore, changes in library ergonomics and information services should rank as the top priority. Having done away with special depositories, Russian libraries needed to be remodeled both physically, i.e. erecting new walls on the old basements, and ideologically, i.e. developing the new type of libraries as cultural institutions.

Most striking in Russia today is library maintenance and construction. In view of the colossal costs of construction this seems a miracle, though it is a fact. In the past 10 years many libraries have completely changed their images from the interiors to the library environment. Today it is hard to believe that



in every Soviet library the stocks or, to be more precise, book depositories, took up most of the room. Ever-shabby catalogue cabinets were always part of the interior. The picture would be incomplete without mentioning one or a couple of reading rooms, and a rarely found plain stand for a small exposition of new arrivals. Computers, if any, were confined to a personnel room behind a partition wall, or in rare instances, a solitary machine was mounted somewhere in the corner for fiche reading. The whole library concept was about the quiet reading of a book behind a plain desk with a lamp.

Today neither the largest Russian libraries holding extensive stocks, nor ordinary municipal and district libraries, can imagine life without a spacious exposition domain, linguistics room, mediatheque, and an Internet access room. These are not just plain compartments having desks and chairs and nothing else. On the contrary, these rooms represent specialized zones accommodating open access stacks and comfortable library furniture.

When I began my work as director of the All-Russian Library for Foreign Literature, I made construction my first and foremost goal. To better explain that, let me quote a brilliant Russian proverb: "They welcome for looks, and treat for brains." I thought these two elements should always go together in a library. A reader should enjoy coming to a library, and what he finds there should keep him until the closing bell.

Apart from setting up mediatheques that had already become quite customary, I bore a special dream to turn All-Russian Library for Foreign Literature into an international cultural center. This idea seemed very natural to me: dialogue of cultures is an essential prerequisite for true openness of the society that had become Russia's compass. This idea was suggested by the very nature of the All-Russian Library for Foreign Literature whose stocks had always been comprised of foreign literature, the "calling cards" of other cultures. The first international center we set up was French. It was followed by the American Cultural Center, the British Council Center, and the Cultural Center of the Japanese Embassy in Russia. These facilities represent specialized reading halls that fit in with the rest of the library. They offer the library's visitors opportunities to learn foreign languages, look through the latest periodicals, consult specialists, play cassettes and disks, and even borrow literature.

Other libraries followed in our footsteps. Today cultural centers in many Russian cities and towns are no longer looking to settle at a separate location.



Rather, they are being nicely accommodated by public libraries where mass interest and access are guaranteed.

Yet another initiative was to set up a hall of legal literature, an analogue of the law library so popular in the West. We have fulfilled this idea, and believe that it holds much promise. This facility offers access to legal literature and law databases to both professional lawyers and ordinary Russian readers, thus favoring broad-spectrum law training of people. I am deeply convinced that development of such facilities in all large libraries in Russia will help us ascend to a truly civic and lawful society, that is so desperately needed today.

The classrooms designed to welcome readers to the Internet—the international information network—represent an issue of special interest. Libraries were the actual players that reshaped the information field in Russia after gaining access to the global net. It is noteworthy that in scientific institutions the Internet has become a means of effective communications among specialists, whereas in libraries, public in particular, the Internet serves as a readily-available and massively-used tool to access information. Internet classrooms offer a broad spectrum of opportunities. Among these are free Internet user training, electronic mail and World Wide Web services, access to the interactive sites of full-text subscription resources, and even to sound archives of training courses and remote teaching programs. Such classrooms have been set up at all the largest federal and regional libraries. Shortly, these facilities will also come to many university, central municipal, village, and school libraries.

All these initiatives have largely reshaped the cultural sphere of books. Mediatheques, expositions, multi-media classrooms, business and legal information centers, Web-master workshops, Internet cafes, remote teaching centers, and publicly available electronic catalogues, etc., represent not just new service tools. These are also a means of the complex involvement of Russian readers in the humanitarian sphere that accommodates earnest activities, useful information and leisure.

Clearly, all these accomplishments sprout from totally new aims and strategies taken by Russian libraries. First of all, this revision affected library management, library education, collaboration with the unions, and international contacts. All of these factors should be considered together because they constitute the field where Russia has never had any solid and independent experience. Here, contacts with foreign colleagues to gain new knowledge have proven extremely helpful.



Two documents have been developed that provide the legal basis for library activities: the “Library Trade Law” and the “Obligatory Document Copy Law.” In addition, the Interdepartmental Expert Automation Council at the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation has worked out a federal Program of Interlibrary Network Interactions (LIBNET). Unfortunately, the economic instability in the country hampers implementation of both laws and the Program. It is fair to say that all the accomplishments in the past 10 years have been made possible thanks to the active work of top- and medium-level managers of individual libraries, rather than the state policy. Searching for alternative funding has become their primary goal.

An assortment of paid services has ubiquitously grown at all Russian libraries, mainly by technical means (Xerox copying, scanning, modeling), and also by provision of some complex information services beyond the scope of those traditional and free of charge. In some libraries, a single reader’s card fee has been introduced to cover the relevant typographic expenses. Many libraries are also offering printing services, book restoration and binding, photo services, microfilming, teaching of foreign languages, organizing and conducting conferences, and seminars and expositions. These services are of much interest to organizations. In this regard, it should be emphasized that the free-of-charge library services guaranteed by law have remained unchanged. Generally speaking, though, these paid services offer no considerable income and make only a small contribution to the library budget.

In this context, charitable foundations and organizations have become the main source of funding to support many library projects. In Russia the main sponsors in the past 10 years have been the Open Society Institute, the University of Illinois Mortenson Center, the Ford Foundation, the Eurasia Foundation, and the U.S. Information Service in connection with the International Research and Exchanges Board (USIS-IREX). Also, organizations such as the BBC, the British Council, the Goethe Institute, UNESCO, and IFLA, the International Federation of Library Associations along with initiative programs by the culture departments of the embassies of the United States, France, Israel, the Netherlands, and Great Britain. Among home foundations, the Russian Foundation for Basic Research has provided the greatest support to libraries.

The funds were allocated first to professional training programs, teaching of foreign languages, adaptation of information technologies, library management, professional conferences, and publishing of professional literature. Financial aid has also been provided to cover costs of acquisition,





purchasing of computer equipment, switching to the Internet, development of local networks and information resources, and development and purchasing of library computer programs. Notably, this aid was quite substantial and amounted to at least one billion dollars for the period of 1989–1999.

Apart from financial support, collaboration between libraries and charitable and public organizations has become a true revolution in the field of management. Processing of traditional, official tasks covered by the budget became seasoned with operational tasks supported by competitive sponsor projects. Along with stimulating libraries and helping them survive in conditions of budding competition with new agencies, this also demanded implementation of new management methods. Successful conducting of competitions and project realization required that consortia be set up. These represented temporary coordination councils whose activities relied mainly on motivation, delegating of authority, and collective management. At the level of individual libraries, mixed and matrix management structures have largely replaced the bureaucratic hierarchy-type administration.

As we have already pointed out, libraries have evolved into complex and open systems whose components interact with one another and the external environment. Naturally, adapting new techniques to manage modern libraries could not rely merely on intuition. It required specialized knowledge and a whole new system of professional training. Russian library education in this field was still at a fetal stage. This is exactly where help offered by foreign colleagues has proven invaluable.

First of all, I would like to emphasize the role of the University of Illinois Mortenson Center and its training program for Russian librarians. The center began its aid program with consultations and training visits from Russian specialists that focused on Internet education and on mastering new technologies. At the same time, library management educational programs were also unfolding. These offered skills in management of projects and personnel, and attracting non-budgetary support. A joint collaborative effort with the Mortenson Center resulted in establishment of Russia's first advanced training center for librarians, the Rudomino School. Its main goal was to improve the level of library education in Russia and CIS. At present, the Rudomino School works in close collaboration with the Moscow State University of Culture—the leading institution that offers library education—and five regional library training centers. This program favors regular training trips for librarians, lectures by leading Russian and foreign specialists, summer



schools, preparation, and translation and publication of textbooks in the field of library management and education.

It is unclear why such terms as cooperation and interaction have become a true discovery for the collectivist-minded Russian society. In fact, the issue of professional cooperation among libraries was first raised only in the early '90s. Before, the "library community" consisted of disintegrated organizations of different administrative subordination. These were rigidly controlled by the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Higher Education, the State Science Committee, the Ministry of Agriculture, and the Ministry of Health, etc. The reins of professional guidance, in those days referred to as "methodological," were held by the Lenin Library. However, the "head library of the country" simply could not, all alone, maintain the ubiquitous library standards at a high level. Russia's breakdown into autonomous federal entities and splitting of the state and local budgets have loosened these ties even more.

At this point libraries started looking for other forms of relations to preserve the "common cultural field," finding those in temporary partner projects and associations. Among the first such assemblies were associations of information system users such as the ISIS User Association and the MARC User Association. Subsequently, larger library unions emerged. Examples of those are the Moscow Library Association, the Russian Library Association, and the St. Petersburg Library Society. Regional level assemblies followed those mentioned. Many such associations have gained collective memberships in IFLA and are successfully carrying out joint professional tasks using international standards as a reference point in their work. Let me refer to a few examples: development of an All-Russian communication format (RUSMARK); harmonization of the inventory rules used by RSL (the Russian State Library), RNL (the Russian National Library), and RBC (the Russian Book Chamber); and opening of the Regional IFLA Center for Conservation and Restoration for Eastern European Countries in Russia. In regard to the progress of international network communications among university and public libraries, a Russian-French remote teaching project that has successfully been realized, should be mentioned. In the coming year it will involve several other European countries.

Now I would like to summarize:

For 10 years libraries have existed in the novel conditions of post-Soviet Russia. Tremendous changes have taken place over this time: libraries have



assumed a totally new ideological orientation. However, they have not only retained, but have significantly increased their professional potential and have completely revised their activities. All these factors have greatly enhanced the role of libraries as one of the most important social institutions in Russia.

Libraries have directly influenced such crucial social phenomena as “informatization” of the society, development of its telecommunications infrastructure, education, legal relations, and publishing and dissemination of books.

Clearly, Russian libraries were not directly involved in the demise of the Evil Empire, as Russia had been referred to in those days. Nor did they ruin the Berlin wall. However having sensed their mission in the developing democratic society, libraries were among the first to become involved in construction of a new social and cultural environment, and continue doing so today. Thereby, they are implementing the right of every individual to free access to information, one of the basic human rights.

Libraries are deeply rooted in social life. Readers, citizens and the society as a whole are being shaped by libraries, and this strongly depends on how libraries observe the principle of openness and accessibility. By practicing various types of activities, libraries actively mediate the feedback between products of culture and their recipients. Readers, in turn, are live participants in historical processes, affecting life with libraries as a part of it. This intercalation is a prerequisite for ascent to an open society, a society open to changes and to the future.

Whither Russia? My dearest wish is to see our efforts and the new type of Russian libraries soon make this question redundant.