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Russian History and the Digital Age

As historians of Russia have immersed themselves in the unpublished sources made available to them in the postcommunist era, it has been easy to overlook a less glamorous change in their working conditions: the creation of electronic catalogues in the two main libraries of the Russian Federation. For decades, a rite of passage for young scholars was their first acquaintance with the *kartoteka* in the Lenin Library or the Saltykov-Shchedrin State Public Library (now the Russian State Library [RSL] and National Library of Russia [NLR], respectively). Given the unsuitability of the open catalogue for all but specific searches—not to mention its omissions, due both to censorship and to human error—researchers had to throw themselves on the mercy of the *bibliograf* or of the custodian of the *sistematicheskii katalog*. American Ph.D. topics had to accommodate themselves to the thematic divisions established by Soviet bibliographical science.

Often, no doubt, the Ph.D. topics were enriched by this encounter with the structures of Soviet knowledge. But the card cabinets of the catalogue hall nonetheless set quite rigid parameters for historical inquiry. Especially by the end of the 20th century, with powerful search engines already commonplace in the West, Russian libraries were becoming an aggravating anomaly. Now, however, specialists can do keyword and thematic searches across a vast corpus of printed books and enjoy the huge convenience of instantaneous checking of references.

Historians of Russia are still less pampered than their counterparts in American or British studies, who are reputed never to get up from their desks as they survey a virtual library that includes almost everything published to 1800 as well as much of the rest.¹ But digitization in Russia has nonetheless gone far beyond the *kartoteka*. We now have at our disposal the electronic libraries of the RSL (just over 80,000 volumes at the last count) and NLR, as well as the large literary corpus of Lib.ru.² Pushkinskii dom offers an

¹ The key British resources are Early English Books Online and Eighteenth Century Collections Online.

² See <http://elibrary.rsl.ru>; www.nlr.ru; and <http://az.lib.ru>.

important online collection of primary sources and serial publications.³ Medievalists are well served by a number of specialized sites that range from birchbark *gramoty* to monastic manuscripts.⁴ Early modernists can view online 16th-century prints and much else besides.⁵ Modernists, as might be expected, have an even greater menu of possibilities—from a project on the institutional structures of the USSR to the “people’s history” of LiveJournal.⁶ In some ways they may even be better off than colleagues specializing in the history of Britain or France: on the one hand, they can benefit from Russia’s relaxed attitude toward intellectual property; on the other, they have access to grassroots projects that hold up transparency—in defiance of a distrusted state—as a cardinal value.⁷ Not that more established institutions are standing aloof: museums, from the Kremlin to the Kunstkamera, have added their rich collections to the Internet cornucopia.⁸ Here and elsewhere, digitization has transformed the range and the quality of (audio-)visual material available for studying and teaching Russian history. Last but not least, the Russian language now has its online national corpus, a fundamental resource for the practitioner of *Begriffsgeschichte*, as well as many other breeds of historian.⁹

In short, Russianists, wherever they may be, can with increasing frequency let their fingers do the walking. They may now get lucky by finding an obscure work on Google Books or on the Russian spinoff Gbooks.¹⁰ Instead of taking the bus to Khimki to read *kandidatskie dissertatsii*, researchers may well be able to find out what they need to know on the website of the Higher

³ See <http://lib.pushkinskijdom.ru>.

⁴ See, for example, the INTAS-funded <http://gramoty.ru> (birchbark documents); the joint project of the Trinity–St. Sergius Monastery and the Russian State Library to provide online publication of manuscripts originating from the monastic library (4,119 manuscripts online as of today) at www.stsl.ru/manuscripts/index.php; and KODEKS, the server of German Slavists, at <http://kodeks.uni-bamberg.de/Kodeks.html>.

⁵ See, for example, the Virtuelle Fachbibliothek Osteuropa at www.vifaost.de.

⁶ The sites in question are www.knowbysight.info/index.asp and <http://russiainmagazine.livejournal.com>.

⁷ In the latter category, note especially the Virtual Gulag Museum (<http://gulagmuseum.org>), which pulls together the holdings of dozens of museums in several countries of the former Soviet Union.

⁸ See www.kreml.ru/ru and www.kunstkamera.ru.

⁹ See www.ruscorpora.ru/index.html.

¹⁰ Google Books includes, among other things, a great number of old (mainly pre-1917) Russian publications, including important multivolume series like *Chteniiia v Obshchestve istorii i drevnostei rossiiskikh* and *Sbornik Russkogo istoricheskogo obshchestva*. Gbooks offers a wide range of scans (including journals going back to the early 19th century) and provides extensive searchable catalogues with links taking the reader directly to the texts. See <http://gbooks.archeologia.ru>.

Attestation Commission (Vysshiaia attestatsionnaia komissiia), a notorious gatekeeper that is now opening some new doors for scholarship.¹¹

Is there a cloud to this silver lining? Although the new resources have certainly changed our lives for the better, they still have their limitations. Online runs of newspapers become slightly less welcome if the quality of the reproductions they offer is low, the status of the site insecure, or the copyright status of the reproduced material dubious.¹² The online resource that historians of Russia most crave—a full and searchable list of *opisi* in at least a few of the main federal archives—remains out of reach; progress in this area seems to have slowed over the last few years, and it remains questionable whether the political will or the funding is there to achieve anything like comprehensive digitization.¹³ More generally, as is only to be expected in a still early phase of the digital revolution, the Russian Internet lacks coordinating structures—for example, a search engine that would pull together all the main research libraries of the Russian Federation.

All these matters might be classified as teething troubles rather than anything more serious. The digitization project, however, is open to more fundamental objections. Google Books and similar resources, for all their marvelous ease of use, have plenty of blind spots and more or less guarantee the neglect of sources that require old-fashioned forays into the library. They also allow readers to parachute into sources, further heightening the eternal temptation not to look beyond the page or two pertinent to one's search. Shelf reading and old-fashioned serendipity would seem to be under threat as never before. The pleasure of reading a book from cover to cover, or even a page from first to last word, is becoming more of an indulgence than ever. No wonder that the death of the book, and in particular the academic monograph, is once again being heralded.¹⁴ In the field of e-publishing, the identity of print journals is being diluted in a sea of databases. Students are increasingly unwilling to read anything that is not on JSTOR. Even their teachers are likely to access the material they require through a keyword search and take

¹¹ See <http://vak.ed.gov.ru>. Note also the commercial site www.dissercat.com, which offers the full text of dissertations for a fee.

¹² For reflections in the same vein, see John Randolph's blog of 6 June 2012 at <http://russianhistoryblog.org/2012/06/istochnikovedenie-2012>.

¹³ In this respect, Estonia—admittedly a small country—leads the way. See the consolidated website of the National Archives of Estonia and Tallinn City Archives at <http://ais.ra.ee>.

¹⁴ See Marshall Poe, "Death to the Reading Class," 1 September 2011, at <http://fortnightlyreview.co.uk/2011/09/death-to-the-reading-class>. For an early, largely congruent statement of the problem, see the face-off between Camille Paglia and Neil Postman in "She Wants Her TV! He Wants His Book," *Harper's Magazine* (March 1991).

little or no interest in the print periodical that first gave it a home. So much for the afterlife of this editorial.

However, to point out that technology may be used badly is not to prove that it is anything other than good. Russia specialists can now accomplish a range of research tasks in a fraction of the time it took them even ten years ago. At least some of the hours they save will be spent on the traditional pursuits of close reading and attentive assimilation of sources (themselves facilitated by newish technologies such as EndNote and scanners). Similarly, while e-books, podcasts, and blogs are already diversifying the field of Russian history and enhancing its communicative potential,¹⁵ the values of analytical complexity, empirical richness, and narrative cohesion—still most commonly achieved in the single-authored book or journal article—are unlikely to go out of fashion anytime soon. By harnessing the power of new technologies, historians are already achieving new levels of empirical saturation, while powerful search engines and multimedia tools promise to give them new ways of working with their material. New technologies will lead us to pose new methodological questions: what, if anything, will it mean for intellectual history when it becomes possible to say exactly how many times, and in what discursive contexts, words like *inorodets* and *intelligentsiia* were used over the entire course of the 19th century? Rather than bringing about a revolution in our intellectual practices, the digitization of Russian history—whether we have in mind primary sources or secondary literature—may just make us better able to do what we wanted to do anyway.

¹⁵ For a manifesto, see Marshall Poe, "Every Monograph a Movie," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 14 June 2012. For the practice, see Poe's own New Books Network at <http://newbooksnetwork.com>.