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International book exchange: has it any future in the electronic age? (A view from the Russian National Library, St. Petersburg)

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Some History

As concerns The Russian National Library, the book exchange began in the late 1950-ies in the context of liberalization of the political regime undertaken by Nikita Khrushchev. Before that time, the single library granted such a privilege was The Lenin State Library of Moscow, currently The Russian State Library, which shares today status of a national library only with The Russian National Library of St. Petersburg. The rapid growth of the exchange reaches its peak in the '60-70s. The exchange became most important source and at times became even the single avenue for acquisition of foreign books as the state funds were designated to subscription of scientific periodicals (mostly medicine and engineering). During the '80s, the volume of exchange began to slide down, with its low point in the early '90s, however the significance of this source of foreign book acquisition has been very high and growing again. Between 1991 and 1994, it was the only way to acquire foreign books.

Although the financing has lately improved, the significance of the exchange is invaluable. It gives us, in the recent years, around 30 000 items of periodicals, 7 000 books, let alone newspapers, posters, and so forth coming from 1 150 partners in 77 countries.

Positive Aspects

The international book exchange viewed from The Russian National Library (and perhaps from the broader Russian perspective) looks like an affordable and effective source of acquisition. Current Russian budgetary difficulties and small portion of the budget allotted to cultural institutions augment the benefits of exchange in comparison with purchase. Even discounts that book traders give to the libraries do not bridge the price gap: Russian books that we exchange are a lot less expensive, that is, through exchange, we are buying foreign books by Russian prices. Even the growing postal tariffs in Russia, which are approaching international ones, still have not erased the value of book exchange.

As a result of sociopolitical changes, present Russian book market is so rich and divers as never before. The Russian reader has never had access to such a variety of books, many of them belong to the category proscribed before the end of 80s. These are in the first place books in social sciences, history, belles-lettres and so forth.

The editions are numerous but small, printed by little, often short-lived companies and are difficult to obtain except by book exchange.

Internal Threats

The most obvious difficulty we face today is low budgeting of Russian libraries. While we don't know how long will last this trend, we are well aware of the imminent threat of ever growing prices of periodicals and books in Russia.. So far, the prices are not nearly that high as the average ones on the global scale. Their grows is held down by the low purchasing power of population. Yet the tendency is too clear to be ignored.

An exacerbating factor is the state of tax laws that threaten the book acquisition including the exchange. According to the tax bill that is currently under discussion in the Duma, Russian libraries would pay added-value taxes on foreign editions including those acquired through the book exchange effective already 2001.

An additional burden is imposed on the libraries by exceptionally time-consuming customs procedures. Smaller libraries simply cannot handle them and have to pay top money to agents or are forced to abandon book exchange altogether.

The most troubling problem that looms large on the horizon is associated with the problem of human resources which greatly differentiates the situation Russian libraries are in from that of the Western. The first problem in this regard is growing shortage of qualified specialists. From the outset of the business of book exchange, the service engaged highly qualified specialists, mainly Leningrad university graduates in philology and history who had command of several foreign languages, were intimately familiar with fine literature, were experienced in work with bibliographical sources, very often themselves were first and very much involved readers of the books which they acquired for the library. The situation drastically begins to change in the early 90s. The sociopolitical changes Russia underwent effected dramatic change of values and professional orientation among young people. These days young university graduates have opportunities not available in the 50s and 70s. A lot more lucrative jobs than those in the libraries have opened before them. At the same time, the salaries of librarians have dropped so low that they are today awfully inadequate. Educated people cannot any longer afford themselves interesting jobs.

Today, The Russian National Library employs 20 librarians in the division of foreign book exchange. Such a team seems to be a luxury by the Western standards, but in fact we cannot any longer sustain a high quality of the staff. Many of those who are well qualified for the job with foreign exchange and

acquisition have already reached the retirement age, and there is no replacement for them from the pool of sufficiently educated people. This is a threatening situation with no solution in view.

Outer Threats

Manifestations of the outer threats have been there for quite some time. The first one has been noticed already in the 1980s: dwindling down of the interest for the Russian book has been registered in many countries. Our main partners in the book exchange are today mainly large university libraries in the West which keep maintaining of Slavic collections high on their list of priorities. The number of such libraries is limited, and their orders have significantly diminished in comparison with the 1960s-80s.

If in the 1960s, practically, there were no other sources for the purchase of Soviet books than The Interbook (Mezhkniga), a monopolistic state agency, today, there is a rather large net of competing book-selling companies that penetrated Western markets. As a good example, I can mention the publishing company Dmitry Bulanin of St. Petersburg which has established well working connections with various libraries and booksellers in Europe and America. The activities of such companies still are spotty and uneven in various countries, but their presence becomes steadier, and their mutual competitiveness brings down prices of Russian books in the West. This tendency is visible quite well in Germany. We have no data, but it would be safe to assume that similar processes are under way in the US.

Clearly, the situation of the Western libraries is different and is ridden with different but nonetheless severe problems. The book exchange business requires knowledge, analytical skills and is labor intensive. It needs a work force with very special qualifications. It requires a team work, and the teams cannot be too small, too. As much as we know, under the present time budgetary limitations, our partners are insufficiently staffed. And having no capacity for checking out carefully the lists of supply against the demands of their respective institutions, they are forced to reduce their book exchange (we suppose, one can argue that this leads to stricter criteria and more focused selection). When the books exchange cannot be handled properly, purchase of books becomes the alternative of necessity.

As we have learned from the representatives of Western book-selling companies, the above mentioned tendency compels libraries in the West to devise new strategies. Increasingly often, European and American libraries commission the booksellers not only to buy books for them, but also to do selections in accordance with criteria spelled in cumbersome itemized forms. Such services are expensive, but employment of teams of qualified specialists in various fields is even more expensive.

Finally, new possibilities opened by the cyber age are not to be missed. The rapidly growing availability of electronic copies of documents housed in libraries makes physical accessibility of a book or a periodical unnecessary. Russian libraries have today electronic means at their disposal. Electronic copying concerns in the first place documents needed to narrow circles of scholars and scientists. Electronic copies serve this kind of readership well, especially as concerns papers from periodicals and parts of books.

Even before the arrival of amazing contemporary means of telecommunication, already in the 1970s, our experience registered decrease of orders for periodicals from our exchange partners, because scientific and scholarly magazines became available through well coordinated channels. This tendency was especially clear as concerned publishers of magazines that conducted exchange with us. If in the 1960s through mid 70s their part in the book exchange was significant -- we used to have many hundreds of such partners, -- today, their participation is very modest.

Means of the Electronic Age

It is hard to forecast today the possibilities which will open ten years from now. Even in the nearest future, we may expect surprises. What seems to be fantastic today will shortly appear in the field of telecommunication, electronic delivery of documents and technologies of making electronic copies. Currently, procedures of document scanning are time consuming, and their feasibility is limited to documents of relatively small size. There is no doubt that these technologies will become in the near future more productive and thus will take a larger share in the international book exchange.

The International Book Exchange: Traditionally Produced Documents and Their Electronic Copies

Then how can we envisaged the future of the international book exchange? Will it withstand the onrush of new technologies or is it bound to become a turned-over page in the history of foreign book acquisition? The overall tendencies are of dual nature: on the one hand, it is clear from the experience of the last decade that the book exchange is dwindling down; on the other hand, it becomes more focused and better fitted to the special needs of partners. We would like to underscore that notwithstanding all the progress in electronic technologies and proliferation of new modes of delivery, libraries still overwhelmingly prefer obtaining traditional paper copies (!) of books and periodicals. We may venture a prediction that the book in its traditional form would acquire in the future even greater value in the eyes of erudite researchers and book lovers in comparison with our own time. A book carries not just information embedded in the text and illustrations, but also a multitude of imprints and testimonies of its age which become more eloquent with the passage of time and usually are not very discernable in its own time. These testimonies will be largely erased by the electronic means of copying no matter how perfect they could become and not carried over in full to the users of future. Yet these testimonies are part of cultural legacy. No doubt, electronically made copies will become a routine component of the book exchange. The proportion of it will stay in direct association with the profile of a library as well as with the availability of funds. The more unique a library is the more capable it will be to supply its partners with the copies of documents and to exchange them for other documents in any form -- traditional or digital. Of course, the international community of librarians will have to solve numerous problems concerning the copyright and licensing. The exchange of editions published in small numbers or those distributed outside of the commercial nets will have its adherers under any circumstances.

A Final Remark

We would like to point out one particular feature of organization of the book exchange in The Russian National Library. From the very beginning, this field attracted specialists of high qualification who, besides the routine library work (conducting correspondence with partners, keeping an inventory of exchange, and so on), were commissioned to monitor the publication scene in every particular field of scholarship that corresponded to the field of their initial specialization acquired at university. This mainly concerned literary scholarship and linguistics, while engineering and medicine were in the hands of specialized bibliographers. This way, the international book exchange stimulated formation of a group of specialists capable of solving various problems associated with compiling collections of foreign books in various fields at the level suitable to a national library. Such conditions have allowed us effectively to conduct the international book exchange as well as other forms of international activities.