IV. Imperial Libraries and Archives

KRISTEN REGINA (Washington, DC, USA)

FOREWORD

The sale and acquisition of imperial Russian books and works on paper during the interwar period (1917-1937) is a complex narrative, but the actors, methods, and overall story are pieced together in the final four essays presented in this volume. Four of the scholars researching the acquisition of imperial books by the New York Public Library; the Harvard Library; and the Library of Congress – the main recipient institutions in the United States during this time – have found new archival documentation in their respective libraries – while Patricia Grimsted has uncovered new information abroad in Russian archives and European collections. While there were massive purchases of Russian books by buyers across Europe and America throughout this period, how many of the books being acquired were really of imperial provenance? Previous research has suggested that the dispersal of the actual libraries of the emperors and their families was rather small – in the range of thousands of books.¹ That finding is further confirmed in the essays presented here.

Why is the mechanism of the sale and purchase of imperial books such a difficult story to uncover, and how did thousands of heavy and bulky items make their way out of Soviet libraries to the European and American auction and library markets? This part of the story is still not entirely clear, but Patricia Grimsted has done extensive archival research in Russia for her present essay, debunking many of the myths surrounding the fate of imperial books. To begin with, she has shown that the supposed large collections of imperial books claimed to be “lost” to looting or bombing during World War II were in fact already removed from palace libraries and thereby escaped destruction during the war. Moreover, some books that were seized by the Nazis and later captured by the Allies were repatriated to the Soviet Union by the Allies after World War II, but not subsequently returned by the Soviets to their respective libraries of origin. She has documented the internal shuffling

of books between the various libraries and departments within the Soviet Union and the inner workings of how “unneeded” and “duplicate” items were chosen for export to the West through library exchanges, auction houses, and dealers. She also shows that the Soviet government had an elaborate organization to sell many imperial volumes for Western currency through its official imprint and antiquarian distributor Mezhdunarodnaia kniga (Mezhkniga) (International book) and through Antikvariat, the high-end exporter of paintings, furniture, objets d’art, and books.

An interesting and still unexplained mystery reflected in Grimsted’s findings and the three other essays in this volume is that none of American libraries show direct dealings with the firm Antikvariat in acquiring imperial titles. They all received their imperial titles through Mezhkniga and its seemingly main outlet for imperial books, the renowned New York City book dealer Israel Perlstein (1897-1975), or his competitor Simeon Bolan (1896-1972).

In all four essays, Mezhkniga is the common thread. Founded in 1921, Mezhkniga had offices in Berlin and Moscow and sold both new Soviet imprints in blanket orders and antiquarian books to the West until 1936, when the supply of antiquarian titles was quickly stopped by the Soviets. Somehow, though, Mezhkniga, competing on its home turf with Antikvariat, acquired collections of imperial books to sell. In the essays by Irina Tarsis, Harold Leich, and Robert Davis and Edward Kasinec, the New York dealer Isaac Perlstein plays a central role. The Soviets handed him collections of imperial books en masse, and on one occasion without his prior agreement, as Leich found in his archival research in the Library of Congress. American institutions were the prime beneficiaries of this seller/dealer relationship established during the interwar period, especially those in the geographical proximity to Perlstein.

Another matter which complicates the story of these imperial books is that many were purchased primarily for their content rather than their provenance; thus, decisions made by libraries at the time of purchase make it more difficult to track the books’ provenance today. The authors show how distinctive imperial book covers were often replaced with standard institutional covers, and that if there are thousands of imperial books in a library collection, these volumes are located among hundreds of thousands of titles, often spread across divisions, different libraries, and special collections within an institution.

Library records that might help with provenance research are also sketchy at best, as acquisition records, dealer catalogs, and working notes librarians made for selection are ephemeral, and this material was not always systematically collected. Much of the information in the following essays was cobbled together from bits and pieces of documentation in institutional records,