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The Russian Literary Scene
in the Reign of Paul I*

Although the reign of Paul I is virtually a self-recommending subject for the attentions of historians of Russian diplomacy, institutions and society, it offers no similar attractions for the literary historian. Flanked by the long and culturally significant reigns of Catherine and Alexander and falling awkwardly at the very turn of the century with three years in the eighteenth century and one and a quarter in the nineteenth, it has no place in the conventional schemes of literary periodization and receives at best only token and passing mention in monographs devoted to writers such as Derzhavin, Karamzin and Krylov. Searching for discussions of the literary scene in those years, one turns in frustration from anticipated sources to A. M. Skabichevskii's noted Ocherki istorii russkoi tsenzury and finds there a whole chapter devoted to the period.¹ The history of Russian literature in the age of Paul might seem to be the history of its censorship.

In this respect Paul's reign is nevertheless best seen in the context of the eighteenth century's final decade. Although Catherine's suspicions of, and indeed repressive measures against the Moscow Freemasons went back to the early 1780's, the axe finally descended only in the 1790's, soon after the beginning of the French Revolution and the sentence on Radishchev. The imprisonment in 1792 of Novikov signalled not only the break-up of Russian Freemasonry but more importantly, the virtual denial of Catherine's 1783 ukaz permitting the establishment of independent presses. The unprecedented burnings of Novikov's impounded books in 1793 and 1794 were followed inevitably by the suppression of the independent presses in one of the last decrees of the enlightened Empress. Paul was prepared to do many things to spite the memory of his mother—but the restoration of any degree of freedom to publish was not one of them. Four decrees in particular chart the worsening conditions under which authors, publishers, and booksellers were compelled to operate. A decree of 4/15 July 1797, requiring all books which the censors considered impermissible or even dubious to be sent for inspection by the State Council, was followed on 17/28 May 1798 by another, which formulated instructions for the censors already operating at ports such as Riga and Odessa and made known the penalties awaiting any private individual who ordered works and journals from abroad, obtained

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1. (St. Petersburg, 1892), pp. 65-85.
them from visiting foreigners, and passed them on to friends. The third decree of 17/28 April 1800, made the St. Petersburg and Moscow censors solely responsible for granting permission for the printing of books in Russia, and on the following day the most notorious of the decrees spared the port censors any further crises of conscience by simply banning the import of all foreign books and sheet music.

The absurdities of the literary censorship are manifest in the reports and activities of the Riga censor Fedor Tumanskii, one-time editor of the journal, Rossiiskii magazin (1792-1794), the epigraph of which—"I dym otechestvennyi sladok"—prepares us for the patriotic zeal, if not its perverted form, which encouraged him to discover everywhere and in everything signs of "the French infection." Attacks on the monarchy, church, officialdom, morality were his particular concern. He was alive to the intention of an author who "by the use of a question mark slyly criticizes a religious maxim" and was incensed on another occasion by the suggestion that lords had no liking for books. He proscribed August Lafontaine "who dares to speak of seeking rank as shameful" and was shocked by "the excessively novel teaching" implicit in the description of the tsar as "the first citizen of country."2 But Tumanskii's aberrations were more than matched by Paul's own. In the year before he prohibited the import of foreign books Paul ordered the suppression of all works, irrespective of their contents, which were dated in accordance with the Revolutionary calendar, and when he was not concerned with changing the shape of hats and the cut of coats, he turned his attention to the subversive potentialities of words. In 1797 he ordered thirteen words to be replaced by others:3 in some cases Russian Prussianisms were to replace Gallicisms (unter-ofitser, khotia i prezhde otstavlen for serzhant; karaul for strazha), in others, republican associations were neutralized (zhiteli or obyvateli for grazhdane and, of course, gosudarstvo for otechestvo), but in some cases the logic defies understanding. One word—obshchestvo—was to be withdrawn completely and not replaced. Remove the work, hopefully remove the concept, but even Paul and his censors were hard pressed to remember what they had resolved and the forbidden word found its way into the text of the censorship decree of 1798, as well as continuing to appear like the other replaced words in all manner of printed works.4

Paul's reign was for Russian authors undoubtedly the winter of their discontent. For the beginning writer the prospects were forbidding—a Miss Demidova from Kaluga submitted her attempt at an epistolary novel (in French) for the scrutiny of the censors, who were alarmed by her innocent deliberations on the Russo-Turkish war and opined that "if a girl was the real

2. Ibid, pp. 71-73.