In 1854, in the village of Zimenki, Kovrov District, Vladimir Province, local landlord Andrei Ivanovich Chikhachev opened the first rural public library in the province. "A public library," wrote Chikhachev, "from which any interested person, might, without any charge, be able to read . . . is a highly beneficial institution. The person who brings forth his mite to this intellectual treasure house, is like the widow in the Gospels. Our Savior will approve of this deed above others."¹ This religious language was echoed in the placement of the library within the chapel of the St. Elijah’s Church in Zimenki. Chikhachev’s establishment of the library was an act of devotion to God which he compared to his help in renovating the Zimenki church and a local monastery. For Chikhachev, enlightenment and religion were complementary, not mutually exclusive.

Chikhachev’s library was to serve the peasants in Zimenki and surrounding villages. In Chikhachev’s own account of the library’s founding, written in 1857, he stated that “A parishioner enlightened by science who recalls the former condition of the [St. Elijah’s] church and compares it to the present day will feel even more gratitude to the Creator that the library has been established in the Zimenki church, as it is the living intellectual power which can do much to make education general. What is a person without writing? And from where can a village resident, particularly a poor one, obtain reading material?”² For Chikhachev, the audience for the library was to be the simple peasant folk from the nearby villages, whom he saw as eager for enlightenment.

Chikhachev's Zimenki library was part of a larger intellectual and religious context. In the late 1840s and early 1850s, the secretary of the Moscow Agricultural Society, Stepan Maslov, argued that rural folk libraries should be established for the peasants. Founded in 1820, the Moscow Agricultural Society (MAS) was a major voluntary association that focused on spreading rational agriculture. During the 1820s and 1830s, the MAS portrayed peasants as irrational and incapable of self-control. Starting in the 1840s, however, the MAS began to see the peasants as the source of Russian nationality. One of the most visible manifestations of this shift was the introduction of the MAS's Literacy Committee in 1845, which sought to teach peasant girls how to read Church Slavonic. Maslov was the head and prime mover of the committee, which was but one example of his Slavophile orientation. As part of the movement for the Literacy Committee, Maslov called for the introduction of rural folk libraries (narodnye sel'skie biblioteki). Maslov argued that such libraries would help to staunch the spread of the morally-harmful books and prints sold by colporteurs (ofeny), who wandered the length and breadth of the Russian empire with books, folk prints (liubki), ribbons and other small items in the boxes on their backs.

This early attempt to establish popular libraries has mostly been ignored by scholars. One exception has been K. I. Abramov. In his otherwise useful 2001 work on Russian public libraries, Abramov characterized Maslov's proposal as an attempt by the Russian Orthodox Church to stop the spread of anti-feudal ideas throughout the peasantry. However, as we shall see, the church was neither the initiator of nor the main participant in Maslov's program. The MAS acted independently of the church. In addition, Abramov's characterization of the proposal as a reactionary one obscures some of the complexities of the movement, which was deeply indebted to Romantic thought as well as to Orthodoxy.

The call for rural folk libraries was part of a larger shift within the history of Russian libraries (and intellectual life) from a focus on the nobility to the peasantry. In 1830, the Ministry of Internal Affairs requested that public libraries be established in all provincial capitals. Such libraries were located within towns and had a proposed audience of nobles, merchants and towns-

4. For more on the ofeny and educated society's fears regarding them, see Jeffrey Brooks, When Russia Learned to Read: Literacy and Popular Culture, 1861-1917 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1985).