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**CLASSICS FOR COMMON PEOPLE AS AN EDUCATIONAL PROJECT
OF THE STANDING COMMISSION OF PUBLIC READINGS IN LATE
IMPERIAL RUSSIA**

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The special attitude towards the literary classics in Russian culture has attracted the attention of researchers from various fields of science. Today, an analysis of the data of electronic and physical libraries shows a high interest of readers in the sector of classical literature¹. It is worth considering that this interest is largely regulated by various educational programs, which in its own way characterizes the modern reading community. In this context the history of the formation of the literary canon does not lose its research value and relevance.

This study is devoted to the history of publishing activities of the institution that significantly influenced the formation of the literary canon in the late period of the Russian Empire, due to its high social status. The so-called *Standing Commission of Public Readings for Common People*, established under the Ministry of Education, was intended to publish appropriate literature for the people. The activities of the Commission were not very productive, and its publications were not as popular as lubok books, with which the Commission tried to compete. However, the Commission is notable for the fact that it prepared special texts for public readings, which were read many times in public audiences, adjusted non-commercial channels of literature distribution, created a new form of leisure for the people, and at the same time was responsible for the state ideology in the field of public enlightenment.

The **object of the study** is the historical practice of public readings for common people arranged by the Commission, as well as the content of these readings and their educational concept. The study is formed around the problem of representation of the classics for the common reader. As a rule, the classic literary text in the editions of the Commission acquired a specific form of adaptation. Stories well known in the educated society were retold, published in fragments, adapted to the realities of life of the Russian peasant. An important attribute of the readings

¹ See Dubin B., Zorkaja N. *Chtenie v Rossii–2008. Tendencii i problemy*. M.: Mezhhregional'nyj centr bibliotechnogo sotrudnichestva, 2008; *Klassika i klassiki v social'nom i gumanitarnom znanii*. M.: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2009; Sokolov M.M., Sokolova N.A., Safonova M.A. Statusnye kul'tury, biograficheskie cikly i pokolencheskie izmeneniya v literaturnyh vkusah chitatelej peterburgskih bibliotek // *Zhurnal sociologii i social'noj antropologii*. 2016. V. XIX. # 3 (86). P. 116—218 ; Braslavski P., Petras V., Likhosherstov V., Gade M.. Large-Scale Log Analysis of Digital Reading. ASIST'2016.

were the magic lantern slides, which were projected on the screen and accompanied the spoken text. The magic lantern slides, as well as the book illustrations for the readings, were aimed to bring the culture of enlightened society closer to the common people. Finally, the practice of readings tended to be embedded in the specific space of auditoriums for public readings. The auditoriums, like the readings themselves, were designed to educate the common people, develop their taste and some physical habits like hygiene and order, and promote sober living.

The **scientific novelty** of the study is determined by the perspective on the Commission's public readings that are regarded as a complex practice including the content of the readings, their visual illustrations, and the specificity of the auditoriums in which they were held. The history of the readings is thus exemplified by a specific institution and examined as a complex practice that has not yet been studied on Russian historical material.

The **purpose** of this study is to examine the figure of the common reader, which was constructed by the state through public readings for common people, and to deepen knowledge of the early formation of popular culture in the pre-revolutionary period.

The main **research questions** focus around the history of public readings for common people and the practices that influenced the formation of the common reader. First of all, the dissertation asks how the need to organize such readings arose, contributing to the allocation of a special state institution responsible for bringing this practice to fruition. It then raises questions about the nature of the institution that emerged, the Standing Commission of Public Readings for Common People: how and by whom it was formed, what it did and what it published, how it positioned itself, and how the literature created by the Commission differed from the literature close to it: school literature and cheap popular literature. Much attention in the dissertation is paid to the question of how classic literature is represented in the editions of the Commission. In other words, how does the literary classics change under the influence of the Commission's bureaucratic and ideological apparatus, and what kind of addressee does it thus build? Particular attention is paid to the historical

context of the public readings: how was the space in which the readings were held arranged and how did it influence the audience's perception? What visual materials accompanied the readings and how did they influence the audience? To what extent were the magic lantern projections meant to influence the construction of the common reader-viewer? Finally, could the Commission's educational project be considered a success?

The **methodology** of the study is characterized by two main approaches: sociology of literature and institutional history. The central notion of "classics" is considered in this dissertation as a social phenomenon of selection of the most authoritative texts by a privileged group of people, by following B. Dubin². The Commission of Public Readings represented such a group of people who formed an authoritative state institution and offered the most valuable texts of the national culture to the common people. However, it is difficult to determine the status of such texts. On the one hand, it would seem that they should belong to conditionally "high" literature, but on the other hand, they are literally not, since they represent only a literary adaptation, the relevance of which is ephemeral and strictly utilitarian.

In order to study the phenomenon of public readings and the constructed common reader, we moved away from the traditional consideration of the mutual penetration of "high" and "low" cultures³, instead turning to the social nature of readings, since this type of literature addressed a fundamentally new addressee, the vast mass of people who, in fact, could barely read. The British historian Martin Lyons drew attention to the existence of specific intermediate forms of literacy that caused its spread⁴. Specifically, Lyons introduces the concept of "delegated writing," describing a mode of communication between illiterate or semi-literate people in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in which the transmission of personal messages between people involved the participation of third parties who were trained in

² Dubin B. *Klassika posle i vmesto: o granicah i formah kul'turnogo avtoriteta // Klassika i klassiki v social'nom i gumanitarnom znanii*, M., 2009. P. 439.

³ See Ginzburg K. *Syr i chervi. Kartina mira odnogo mel'nika, zhivshogo v XVI veke*. M., 2000. P. 31-56.; Bahtin M.M. *Tvorchestvo Fransua Rable i narodnaya kul'tura srednevekov'ya i Rennsansa*. M., 1965.

⁴ Lyons M., *The Power of the Scribe: Delegated Writing in Modern Europe // European History Quarterly*, 2014. Vol. 44(2), P. 244-262. См. также Lyons M. *Readers and society in nineteenth-century France: Workers, women, peasants*. New York: Palgrave, 2001. 220 p.

literacy and could encode and decode the message being sent. Similarly, popular reading represented what might be defined as "delegated reading". Special books for common people implied public reading for illiterate listeners, so there was only one person who actually read, while the audience of listeners could include children, educators, workers and policemen.

Considering the complex nature of the addressee of public readings, it was important for us to understand how this practice was organized technically, so this dissertation examines three practical aspects of public readings for common people: the texts that were published for public readings, the space in which the readings were held, and the visual accompaniment of the readings. Following R. Chartier's methodological approach, the main research observations in this work are focused on the features of cultural appropriation⁵, namely, on those shifts and transformations of value relations that emerged in different social environments and were reflected in the practice of public readings. Public reading narratives were constructed in the environment of the state officials and were considered as one of the tools of appropriation of a number of value concepts, including the national literary canon. On the one hand, public readings were intended to explain the values of an enlightened society to common people, but on the other hand, they opened an opportunity for the educated community to define its status as the dominant social culture and to build a vertical communication with the common reader.

The study of the classical texts adaptations for common people motivated us to address to the receptive analysis, mainly using the approach of G. Jauss that implied the study of the horizon of expectations that are actualized in the text in relation to its addressee⁶. For a general understanding of how the visitor public readings responded to the text addressed to him, we also engaged real receptive material.

As part of our approach to historical sources, we were guided by the works

⁵ Shart'e R. Pis'mennaya kul'tura i obshchestvo. M., 2006. P. 191-210.

⁶ Yauss X.R. Istoriya literatury kak provokatsiya literaturovedeniya // Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie. 1995. № 12. P. 97-106.

of J. Brooks⁷, A. Reitblatt⁸, R. Darnton⁹, C. Kelly¹⁰ and other reading theorists presented in the recently published three-volume book "Reading Russia"¹¹, in which an important place is taken by the problems of the institutionality of literature, the canon and reading practices. An important methodological support for the study was the creation of an electronic database of publications of the Standing Commission of Public Readings for Common People, which allowed to look at the publishing dynamics, the genre diversity of public readings, the list of authors and many other features of the publishing policy.

The following statements are offered for defense:

- The Standing Commission of Public Readings for Common People arose as a domestic policy tool to combat drunkenness and develop alternative leisure time in large cities, but over time it began to take on foreign-policy tasks to shape the image of an enlightened state.

- The Commission was a state institution and positioned itself as an authoritative, reliable organization that offered the best literature for the people, trying to compete with the popular, but low-quality on various parameters of cheap popular literature. However, the nature of the competition for the reader shows that the Commission became not so much a distributor of "correct" literature as a tool in the fight against illegal reading and illegal literature. That is why the Commission was not only a publishing house, but also an organization that worked out special legal regulations for public readings and issued permits for them.

- The pantheon of classical literature, the canon that was formed in the editions of the Commission, shows that the state ideological attitude toward public education was an attempt to combine conventionally "high" literature of educated

⁷ Brooks J. *When Russia Learned to Read: Literacy and Popular Literature, 1861—1917*. Illinois, 2003.

⁸ Rejtlat A.I. *Ot Bovy k Bal'montu i drugie raboty po istoricheskoi sociologii russkoj literatury*. M., 2009.

⁹ Darnton R. *Velikoe koshach'e poboishhe i drugie ehpizody iz istorii francuzskoj kul'tury*. M: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2002.

¹⁰ Kelly C., *Refining Russia: Advice Literature, Polite Culture, and Gender from Catherine to Yeltsin*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001.

¹¹ *Reading Russia. A History of Reading in Modern Russia* / Ed. by Damiano Rebecchini and Raffaella Vassena. Milano: Università degli Studi di Milano, 2020. V. 1-3.

society with literature that was thematically close to the peasants, factory workers, and the urban poor in general. As a result of long editorial and often collective critical work, the publishing house produced adaptations of national and world classics in which realities understood by the people were actualized, which was supposed to help the people "appropriate" the literature offered by the state.

- The commission was involved in developing a special audience for people's readings. The spatial organization of such an auditorium was intended to influence the behavior of the visitors to the readings, who were not accustomed to such public gatherings. The auditorium space was intended to turn an unkempt, noisy crowd into rows of clean and attentive listeners.

- The visual accompaniment of the people's readings by means of light projections demonstrates the complex structure of addressing public readings. Those contexts that actualized the light illustrations to the folk readings could not be deciphered by their main addressee, the people themselves, but could be familiar to the educators and all those educators who campaigned for the dissemination of public readings for the people. The dual targeting of the readings for the people was intended to help construct not only the identity of the people, but also the identity of the enlighteners themselves.

- The success of the Commission's enlightenment project was mixed. On the one hand, the Commission did not produce truly popular literature that could have supplanted the cheapskate publications, even given the non-commercial distribution strategies that the Commission employed. On the other hand, the Commission created regulations to control mass dissemination, established an infrastructure of public readings, and through numerous experiments with literary adaptations shaped its own discourse for popular readings, and contributed to the construction of national identity at the turn of the nineteenth century.

Theoretical Significance. This dissertation offers an opening to the discussion of readings for the people as a specific form of literature that played a significant role in the spread of literacy and the construction of national identity in the pre-revolutionary period. This study presents publications for public readings as

a phenomenon of the history of reading and deepens the understanding of the role of the classics during the formation of popular popular culture in the Russian Empire.

Practical significance of the research work is the text of the dissertation, articles and other publications devoted to the three aspects of public readings for the people: the content of the readings, light pictures and other visual materials that accompanied the readings, as well as the features of the device of special auditoriums for readings. The study also resulted in the preparation and publication of a metadata database of the Commission's publications, including 505 publications¹², which could be a springboard for a broader base of Russian public readings with a magic lantern. Such a database does not yet exist in Russia, but the creation of such a database would add to the international collection of materials on pre-film art¹³.

The **structure** of the dissertation research consists of an introduction, five chapters and a conclusion:

The first chapter is devoted to the research history of the popular reading. This chapter attempts to trace the development of research interest in popular reading, from the practical anthropological approach in the middle of the 19th century to modern theoretical works. The second chapter seeks to describe the history of the formation of the Standing Commission of Public Readings for Common People. The heads of the Commission, the history of the succession of its chairmen, and the writers who were invited to develop literary adaptations are examined here. In this chapter a particular attention is given to the conditions of the organization of popular readings, which were dictated by strict government regulation. The description of public reading practices as offered by the Commission also leads us to compare public readings with the close practices of school reading and reading of popular lubok books in the second half of the 19th century.

The third chapter analyzes the content of the fiction adaptations that the

¹² The catalog of the Standing Commission of Public Readings is now publicly available at github.com: <https://github.com/yanagafonoff/komissiya-narodnih-chteniy-katalog>

¹³ The pre-cinema study communities are now a vast network of organizations in many Western countries, e.g. see The Magic Lantern Society of the UK, The Magic Lantern Society of the US and Canada, B-Magic (Belgium), A Million Pictures (Netherlands), and the web platform lucerna.exeter.ac.uk, where material on mainly British and American public readings is collected.

Commission offered for public readings. Narrative strategies for adapting the classic text for the common reader are studied in detail here. This approach reveals the artificial convergence of the horizons of the common reader's expectations and the classical text that was not intended for him. The fourth chapter examines public readings in the context of the spatial organization in which they were held, namely the auditoriums for public readings are studied here. This broader perspective on the practice of public reading revealed that the assimilation of classical literature coexisted with such practices as tea drinking and gymnastic exercises. The popular auditorium project focused on a very wide range of poor people who, despite all educational efforts, found themselves marginalized from the educated society.

The fifth chapter is devoted to visual strategies for adapting the classics for common people. It examines the visual accompaniment of public readings, namely covers, illustrations, and magic lantern slides. In this chapter we identified the firms with which the Commission of Public Readings collaborated, we also analyzed the strategies of illustrating the classics. On the one hand, illustration practices could accompany classical works with scenes from peasant life; on the other hand, some illustrations may have pulled in contexts that could not be recognized by semi-literate people. Thus, public readings demonstrate a double addressment: they simultaneously address the common people and the educators, who were responsible for public readings organization, contributing to the construction of the identities of both.

The final part of the dissertation draws conclusions about the peculiarities of the educational project of the Commission of Public Readings. It is shown that the institution strived to construct the identity of the common reader as a part of not only domestic but also foreign policy. It is also discussed how the discourse of public readings influenced the social marginalization of peasants, which in turn critically affected pre-revolutionary educational policy in general.

The main content of the work

The history of the Commission of Public Readings shows that the publishing program predominantly depended on its chairman. For example, the greatest number of adaptations of classical works was published under V. Solovyov, in the early period of Nicholas II, and the number of books on travels for common people was growing throughout the history of the Commission, regardless of their superiors. The main idea behind the practice of creating special books for common people was about bringing together the values of an enlightened society and semi-literate people and promote the models of behavior for the poor that would be acceptable to state authorities. This implication persisted throughout the Commission's enlightenment project. The legal regulation of public readings was overwhelmed with formalities and rules, which were designed to control public readings in the country and to prevent the dissemination of undesirable ideas, which hindered the process of popularization of literacy and public readings.

Public readings were not a part of the developing educational system but represented a hybrid form of extracurricular education and urban (sometimes rural) entertainment. Schooling was not compulsory and could only be designed for the few peasants who were willing to invest their time in it. A significant number of adult urban seasonal workers could not afford to go to school, so it was the audience that the Commission generally targeted. In addition, being outside the school system public readings appealed the authors who were freed from the need to impart formal knowledge, unlike, for example, the authors of school textbooks. Thus, the creation of readings became a creative process that often required collective discussion, which made the complicated procedure even longer¹⁴.

Being outside the system of public education, the public readings for common people could be organized and published by private individuals, thus the Commission's publications competed not only with other commercial publications

¹⁴ Khrushhov I.P. Ob izdatel'skoj deyatel'nosti Postoyannoj Komissii narodnyx chtenij i uchrezhdenogo pri nej Obshhestva za pyatnadcat' let (1881-1896) Spb., 1901.

for common people, but also with the cheap and popular lubok books, the authors of which were themselves representatives of the common people's environment. Such competition was a strategic struggle of educators against low-quality books and useless content, according to Commission's opinion¹⁵. The struggle was carried out with the help of additional non-commercial channels of distribution of printed materials and a new form of public leisure - public readings. It is difficult to say how productive the Commission's methods proved to be; cheap lubok books never ceased to be popular until the revolution, but the Commission created a new stable practice of public readings and formed an official discourse addressed to the common reader.

The popularization of the canon literature of educated society was one of the main publishing strategies of the Commission of Public Readings. The problem of representation of the classical text in the Commission's publications was discussed in detail in Chapter 3. Based on the catalog of the Commission's issues¹⁶, the most frequently republished authors were W. Shakespeare, A. Pushkin and A. Koltsov, who probably created an important unity of the canons of world literature, the national one and the literature that described the peasant life. The reputation of A. Koltsov as a peasant poet was created by V. Belinsky; it was Belinsky's article on Koltsov that the Commission adapted for public readings. It is not surprising that Koltsov fell out of the official literary canon as soon as the ideological focus on the peasantry changed. Adaptation for public readings occurred not simply by reducing the original text, but also by focusing on calendar and other everyday and behavioral contexts close to peasant life. On the other hand, the context associated with the social and cultural code of the educated and wealthy class was largely excluded from the classical narrative, as it became an obstacle to understanding for peasants and urban workers.

The educational ambitions of the Commission went beyond adaptations of classical texts. Public readings were a complex practice that involved different

¹⁵ Nekrasova E.S. Narodnye knigi dlya chteniya v ix 25-letnej bor'be s lubochnymi izdaniyami. Vyatka: Vyat. t-vo, 1902.

¹⁶ The catalog of the Standing Commission of Public Readings for Common People is publicly available at github.com: <https://github.com/yanagafonoff/komissiya-narodnih-chteniy-katalog>

channels of perception, so we addressed to the problem of the spatial organization of readings in Chapter 4. The Commission used its educational project as an instrument to shape the common reader by influencing his views and physical habits. Educational literature about the rules of the peasants' social life, hygienic procedures, and a sober way of life was, according to the educators' plan, to be reflected in the very building for public readings. The pavilion for public readings was to be a multifunctional space that could turn the crowd into an army of clean, harmoniously organized and sober people.

In the last chapter, we discussed the visual aspect of public readings and how the illustrative materials of public readings could clarify the figure of the common reader. We described how the conservative press that supported the Commission's educational project portrayed the common reader, emphasizing, on the one hand, his national value, loyalty, and enthusiasm for reading, and, on the other hand, comparing him to the common readers of other enlightened empires and proving that the Russian people are no less enlightened than the peoples of their political rivals. Materials on censorship of magic lantern slides showed that religious and ideological discrepancies derived from such canonical literature as *The Divine Comedy*, provoked new forms of adaptations and abridgements, but did not abolish such texts. Thus, the educators thought of the Russian common reader as included in a pan-European cultural context and constructed it accordingly.

By examining the magic lantern slides for public readings, we have discovered the double addressing: on the one hand, the public readings were addressed directly to common people, on the other hand, to the educators, which brings the model of the public readings closer to children's literature that is usually addressed to a child and a parent at the same time. This dual targeting made it possible to see the common reader not only as a child absorbing the fruits of knowledge, but also as a subject of domestic and foreign policy that helped educators to construct their own identity. The study revealed that actual visitors of public readings were highly distanced from the culture of elites and could hardly appropriate it because the adaptations implied predominantly political, not artistic

purposes. One can say that the appropriation was more formal than genuine. Moreover, the participants of public readings were radically isolated from the educated society and elites in people's houses and special auditoriums, which affected the tensions among common people in the pre-revolutionary period and generated the corresponding reaction of misunderstanding, noted by many contemporaries¹⁷.

The enlightenment project of the Commission of Public Readings was extremely important for the popularization of the national literary canon. The Commission created an instrument of soft influence on masses of semi-literate people and devised the first model of cultural and recreational interaction of the state authorities with a large audience and, despite the bureaucratized procedure of arrangement of public readings, it launched a stable and accessible practice of useful and recreational leisure in the society.

Review of results

The results of the dissertation were presented in four academic papers, and an article was also published in a specialized journal of the Magic Lantern Society of Great Britain. The chairs of this society marked the research project with the Mervyn Heard Award. The author also prepared a chapter on public readings for an academic collection on the history of literary institutions. The results of the dissertation were discussed at seven conferences. The author had also a fellowship in Helsinki, while working on the dissertation, which implied the opportunity to work with local archives and libraries.

Articles:

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¹⁷ See An-skij S.A. *Narod o knige* // An-skij S.A. *Narod i kniga. Opyt xarakteristiki narodnogo chitatelya*. M., 1913 ; Alchevskaya X.D. *Chto chitat' narodu?: v 3 t.* SPb., 1884–1906 ; Marakuev V.N. *Chto chital i chitaet russkij narod*. Moskva, 1886.

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