

Foreword: French Language Acquisition in Imperial Russia

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Abstract

The foreword to Vivliofika's cluster of articles on French language acquisition in Imperial Russia mentions the scholarly project and conference out of which the cluster arises, briefly describes the UK-based project, states the importance of study of education in it, summarises a few of the main educational questions that are germane in this connection and, finally, simply introduces the contents of the cluster.

The articles in the following cluster on aspects of the learning of French (and to some extent German too) in eighteenth-century Russia arise out of a project on [The History of the French Language in Russia](#) and papers presented at a conference associated with it which was held in Bristol in September 2012. This three-and-a-half-year project is fully funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) of the United Kingdom and is based in the University of Bristol.¹

The history of French in Imperial Russia is an important but as yet not very thoroughly studied subject. From the age of Louis XIV, French became a language of international communication that increasingly replaced Latin, Europe's *lingua franca* in the Middle Ages. It was carried abroad both by the cultural influence of France, which made itself felt in the various European courts that took the court at Versailles as their model, and by the emigration of the Huguenots to other parts of Europe following the revocation of the Edict of Nantes by Louis XIV in 1685. The international standing of French also benefited from the existence of the rich literature produced in it during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and from the development of a discourse about the supposed universality of the French language, which was most fully articulated by Antoine de Rivarol in a prize-winning essay submitted for a competition organized by the Berlin Academy in 1783.

All European countries—albeit in varying degrees—underwent the influence of French culture in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries. The fact that French was a vehicle for the spread of this culture and the prestige that French had acquired were major factors in this process. Far from being merely a vehicle for what many Europeans considered a cultural invasion, French was a powerful means of negotiation, exchange, and transfer in European space. It pervaded the spheres of diplomacy, science, learning, art, literature, and other forms of culture (in the comprehensive sense of the word), such as cuisine, leisure pursuits, etiquette, polite conversation, and cultivation of the art of living. It was largely thanks to knowledge of French that certain societies on the margins of Europe were able to gain access to the culture of the Enlightenment. Russia was affected strongly—or even to an exceptional degree, some would argue—by this cultural and linguistic influence.

¹ Further details, including the programme of the 2012 conference and recordings of the papers delivered at it, may be seen on the project's website: <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/arts/research/french-in-russia> (last accessed 22 October 2013).

We conceive of the production of a history of the French language in Imperial Russia as an enterprise that should draw on the work done in and methods adopted by many disciplines, ranging from historical sociolinguistics to social, cultural, political, and intellectual history. The enterprise also has many dimensions. We need, for instance, to study—in so far as one can on the basis of such written sources as have survived—linguistic habits in various domains where French was used. These domains included the court, branches of government (the diplomatic service, the Third Section) and noble society (in the salon, at the *soirée*, and the ball). We should examine writing in French, in the press, and in literature broadly conceived, that is to say, writing in both fictional and non-fictional genres and in texts aimed at the private sphere (personal diaries and correspondence) as well as texts intended for publication. We must also consider the linguistic effects of the use of a foreign language on Russian soil. These effects were both direct (as felt, for example, in the adoption of loanwords and calques) and indirect (inasmuch as the presence of French sharpened native linguistic consciousness, spurred codification of the vernacular, stimulated the development of and pride in the Russian literary language, and provided models for Russian writers to emulate and even purist language attitudes for them to adopt). The role of command of French in social differentiation should be explored, with due attention to varying degrees of mastery of it within the nobility itself. So too should reactions to francophonie, such as linguistic gallophobia and linguistic patriotism, especially in the Romantic age and the age of nationalism.²

In the construction of this multifaceted history of French in Russia, the subject of education has an important place. If the French language was a pre-requisite for the presentation of Russia to a European public as a newly enlightened country, with a native culture worthy of foreigners' attention, then Russians needed to master a language through which they could inform foreigners of such things. In any case, a *lingua franca* was required with the aid of which foreign visitors could be received in Russia and in which foreigners, for their part, could make themselves understood to Russians. Again, if French was an indispensable tool in the belated modernization of Russia, which was greatly accelerated by Peter the Great in the first quarter of the eighteenth century, then people were needed who could translate from it into Russian the myriad works (on subjects ranging from architecture, engineering, and military strategy to political philosophy, morals, and belles-lettres) with which Russians now needed to be conversant. (Such works included works translated into French from other foreign languages, especially German and English.) If, finally, French was an attribute of a self-respecting second estate, which saw itself as a corporation with rights as well as obligations, then it was chiefly through education (and only after that

² We aim to compile a history of this sort through the following publications: a volume on the pan-European context in which Russian francophonie can be set, entitled *European francophonie: The Social, Political and Cultural History of an International Prestige Language*, forthcoming with Peter Lang; two volumes on the relationship between French and Russian in Imperial Russia, i.e. *French and Russian in Russia from the Enlightenment to the Age of Pushkin: Volume 1. The Use of French among the Eighteenth- and Early Nineteenth-Century Russian Elite*, and *Volume 2. Language Attitudes and the Formation of Social, Political and National Identity*, under contract with Edinburgh University Press; a corpus of primary sources and commentary on them, which is being constructed on the *History of the French Language in Russia* [project website](#) (also accessible via the [Corpus of Documents](#) link from the main page); a cluster of articles on the main foreign languages used or known in eighteenth-century Russia; and, finally, an overarching monograph.

through social intercourse with foreigners and travel abroad) that Russians would acquire this aspect of noble identity.

It is therefore essential, in a history of language of the kind we imagine, to address questions of the following sort: What attempts did state-supported institutions such as the Noble Cadet Corps, Moscow University, and the Smolnyi Institute make to teach French? What efforts did private noble families make to learn it or have their children learn it? What was the relationship between French and German in Russian society and education during the eighteenth century, when contacts between Russia and the West were being greatly expanded? How accessible was such education to people beyond the highest noble stratum, for example in the petty nobility and the clergy? Were the sexes, as well as social strata, differentiated in respect of foreign-language acquisition, as in other respects? Was it felt more important, for example, that the daughters of nobles should be francophone than that their sons should be, and were patterns of use of French associated with conceptions of the different social roles of men and women? What linguistic standards did learners of these various types reach, and with the help of what teaching aids? Who taught French and how were teachers of French perceived?

The four articles that appear in this issue of *Vivliofika*,³ along with the ones already published on our project website,⁴ begin to tackle such questions. Vladislav Rjéoutski, in his introductory article, outlines the aims of the cluster, the sort of sources available for study of the subject, and the approaches that might be taken to it. He also provides the pan-European background against which the Russian case should be viewed and outlines language-teaching policy under various Russian rulers in the course of the eighteenth century. He then proceeds, in the second article in the cluster, to investigate the teaching of French and other living languages in state educational institutions and in private education. Next, Ekaterina Kislova explores the teaching of French and German in the ecclesiastical schools of the Russian Orthodox Church. These three articles all place the history of French teaching in Russia in the larger context of the teaching of living foreign-languages in general. Rjéoutski and Kislova also systematically present information about French alongside information about

³ The *Vivliofika* cluster is presented in French for a number of reasons. First, French was the language in which two of the three papers from which the cluster arises were originally delivered, by Russian scholars, at the conference we mention in the first paragraph of this foreword. Second, and more importantly, we believe that by using French, rather than English or Russian, we may reach not only specialists on eighteenth-century Russia (who are likely to be familiar with French) but also a large potential readership of francophone specialists on the history of French as a foreign and second language. These specialists will include members of such networks as [Société internationale pour l'histoire du français langue étrangère ou seconde](#) (SIHFLES). Third, it seemed best to us to present the articles as a coherent whole in the same language and therefore to translate the article that arose out of a paper originally delivered in Russian into French rather than to leave it in Russian or translate it into English. Use of French for the introductory essay was a logical final step. We are grateful to the editors of *Vivliofika* for the support and encouragement they have given during the production of this cluster of articles and to the journal's anonymous readers for their constructive suggestions. We also warmly thank Rodolphe Baudin for reading and making corrections in two articles in the cluster and Kumar Guha for translating the article by Ekaterina Kislova.

⁴ "Teaching and learning French in the early eighteenth century: Ivan Shcherbatov's letters to his French teacher"; "French in public education in eighteenth-century Russia: the case of the Cadet Corps"; "French in the education of the nobility: Mikhail Shcherbatov's letters to his son Dmitrii," in [Scholarly Resources](#), *History of the French Language in Russia* (last accessed 22 October 2013).

German, which was the great competitor to French in eighteenth-century Russian education. Finally, in the fourth article, Sergei Vlasov provides a more exhaustive taxonomy of the books used for learning French in eighteenth-century Russia than has ever been attempted before. Between them, the three authors lay foundations not only for further work on the history of Russian education but also for fresh consideration of questions of perennial interest to students of Russian culture, such as the extent to which Russia was integrated into the mainstream of modern European civilization in the eighteenth century and whether Russian experience was exceptional in the European context.