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Knowledge Organization in Russia: Problem-related and Historical Aspects



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Reviews the contribution by Russian researchers and specialists to the organization of knowledge, which for a number of reasons have remained unknown outside Russia. Looks into the main directions of classification practice in Russia in the 20th century. Analyzes the level of research of foreign professional experience and the state of bibliographical research concerning the problem of knowledge organization. (Author)

1. Russia's Unknown Contributions

Only 60 years ago, H.E. Bliss put forward the first definitions of knowledge organization, which today is turning into a separate scientific discipline. The question concerning its sources, history and the contributions by scientists and specialists from each country to knowledge organization naturally evokes interest. For various reasons, Russia's contribution has remained practically unknown to foreign scientists to this day. Frankly speaking, this contribution has not been deeply studied by us Russians either, experience in this field has not been generalized, and well-known scientific facts, names and phenomena have not been ordered. Unfortunately, we encounter a marked tendency here for laying down the significance of any and all of our domestic achievements. In this respect we must give our foreign colleagues their due: in their works we find an objective assessment of these or other events of our domestic history. It so happens that many works well known to us are valued more highly abroad, if only by reason of their uniqueness. Within this context we should mention, for example, E.I. Shamurin's two-volume work "*Essays on the History of Library-Bibliographical Classification*", which has no analog in world literature. Due to E.I. Shamurin, some Russian classification systems of the 18th and 19th centuries, original in many things and valuable in terms of science, have become more or less known abroad. They are not many in number, but they are all original in their conception and interesting as regards their structure and content. In terms of typology, all these systems are of the enumerative type.

The author of one of the first Russian systems was a library science enthusiast, Andrei Ivanovich Bogdanov (1693-1766), who worked for over 36 years at the Library of the Academy of Sciences. The purpose of the document he created, called "*The beginning of the origination of*

sciences", remained unknown to this day, yet how many interesting ideas it contains! Pavel Grigorievich Demidov (1738-1821) compiled a classification system for the printed catalog of his book collections. Other systems, which we shall discuss further, had a more happy fate - they were used in libraries and, what is more, in the largest book warehouses of Russia. The "*Experience of a new bibliographical order*" (1808), developed by Alexei Nikolayevich Olenin 1763-1843) for the Imperial Public Library in St. Petersburg, was used not only in libraries, but in the book-trade bibliography, too. It was interesting for us to learn that the author studied the foreign experience of his day, but was dissatisfied with it and went his own way in his research.

The authors of the next two systems deserving special mention were prominent scholars and university professors. Friedrich Friedrichovich Reiss (1778-1852) worked out his "*Disposition of the Library of the Imperial Moscow University*" (1822), being well acquainted with university systems. Karl Karlovich Voigt (1818-1873) also went his own way in his research. He was a professor of philosophy, director of the Kazan University Library and the author of the "*Plan of disposition of the library*" (1834). The last name, in terms of chronology, in this selected list is that of Academician Karl Maximovich Baer (1792-1876), whose system furnished the basis for the grouping of the books of the Foreign Department of the Library of the Academy of Sciences (1841).

In the late 19th century, the Russian intelligentsia was sufficiently well informed about the state of affairs in the foreign classification world. In those years there were no language barriers and the information received generally was first-hand information as many bibliographers carried on a regular correspondence with their foreign colleagues. It so happened that Russia could not participate in the International Congress organized by Paul Otlet and Henry LaFontaine in Brussels in 1895. The reason for this was a valid one: the official appointed by the Czarist government could not be present at the session because he was "old and infirm". However, the information about the Brussels initiative reached Russia very quickly, and well-nigh simultaneously an active propaganda for the future UDC began in a number of Russian cities. This propaganda was realistic and business-like. Evgeni Narkisovich Dobzhinsky (1864-1938) introduced the new system into the practice of two large libraries: in 1899 at the Warsaw Po-

lytechnical Institute, and in 1902 at the Polytechnical Institute of St.Petersburg. Subsequently he did much for the study and dissemination of the UDC publishing his own UDC tables in 1924 and 1930.

The Novorossiysky University in Odessa became yet another center for the dissemination of the UDC. The publications of the University were issued with UDC numbers, which were printed in the center of the title page. Several decades ago (in 1968) we turned to readers through the "Unesco Bulletin for Libraries" with the request to send us information concerning earlier instances, if any, of centralized classifying in any part of the world (one of the first publications in Russia was dated 1904), but we did not receive any answers.

However, it was Bogdan Stepanovich Bodnarsky (1874-1968), who began to most actively advocate the UDC in St.Petersburg. On his initiative, courses and seminars were organized and numerous articles were published. It became natural for every cultured Russian to know the Brussels version of the Decimal Classification. Numerous modifications of the UDC were published in the country and the supporters of the Classification united into the "Society of Russian Decimalists".

2. UDC Victorious in Russia

It was, therefore, not surprising that the UDC should be chosen when a few years later N.K.Krupskaya signed a governmental Decree on the introduction of the Brussels variant of the Decimal Classification into the libraries of the Republic (Jan.21, 1921). This event should be recorded in the history of the UDC, since at that time this system could not lay claim to governmental support in any other country of the world. However, anticipating events, we must say that this decision did not remain the sole one to be taken on such a high level: in 1962, the UDC was made an obligatory system by a decree of the USSR Council of Ministers, and since 1985 the usage of a number of classification systems is regulated by a State Standard.

In the beginning of the 20s some events took place after which the monolithic classification movement broke up into a number of directions, which from then on developed independently. The specialists also drifted into confronting groupings. Today we can already state that this division has greatly harmed the general cause. Only faculties of our institutions of higher learning gathered objective information about the state of affairs, and not too regularly at that.

The first direction was connected with the activities of public libraries of the country. The abridged tables of the Brussels version of the DC, prepared in 1921, 1929 and 1931, showed that it was impossible to use them in this form. By the mid-thirties the number of libraries maintaining systematic catalogs diminished. The subject catalog was winning new supporters (at that time the systematic catalog and the subject catalog were rivaling catalogs, and the discussions and arguments about them were extremely heated. It was only after many decades had passed, and

with the help of the works of S.K.Vilenskaya, A.Y.Kushal, and translations of S.R.Ranganathan's works, that we came to understand how wrong we were...).

As it has become known today, it was N.K.Krupskaya who corrected the position of the systematic catalog: at first she commissioned L.N.Tropovsky (1885-1944) to prepare the revised tables of the Decimal Classification and then, in December 1936, at the Conference on Theoretical Questions of Library Science and Bibliography, she dealt a heavy blow to the advocates of the subject catalog, declaring it to be merely an "additional" one. Lev Naumovich Tropovsky successfully fulfilled his task, and the tables bearing his name were published a number of times in the period from 1938 to 1944, which permitted the libraries to maintain the systematic catalog. Tropovsky's cause was continued by his pupil, Z.N.Ambartsumjan (1903-1970). The tables, of which he was editor, were put out up to the mid-seventies, i.e. up to the time when libraries began to switch to the new tables of the Library-Bibliographical Classification (LBC).

Another direction supported the demands of academic (scientific) libraries of the country, which needed a profoundly detailed classification system and here the Tropovsky-Ambartsumjan tables were evidently insufficient. The work was headed by the Book Chamber and at the first stage, approximately up to the mid-thirties, this work was successfully conducted by the prominent theoretician and practical specialist of the UDC, Nikolai Valerianovich Rusinov (1873-1940) in close collaboration with Paul Otlet and the International Bibliographical Institute (later the International Federation of Documentation). Then there came a period which was difficult for the country in general and an extremely hapless one for the UDC; this period embraced more than two decades. The result of the amateurish "developing" of the UDC was the so-called "Tables of Book Chamber Practice", which were extremely remote from the international system. However, we got to know about this only in the late fifties, after VINITI became a member of the International Federation of Documentation and the standard UDC tables finally reached us. The second recognition of the UDC in the capacity of a State system (May 11, 1962) was natural. However, we should confess here that it was not immediately that we received a sufficiently literate edition of the UDC, which would be in keeping with the international standards. The first edition (1963-1966) manifested all the shortcomings connected with the full decentralization of the translating, editing, and publishing activities involved with the issue of the tables. Later this work was commissioned to a single organization (in 1966 the All-Union Research Institute of Scientific and Technical Information, Classification, and Coding (VNIKI) was established in Moscow), where it was conducted under the supervision of the Interdepartmental Commission for Classification. The second edition in 6 volumes and 9 books was published in 1969-1971, and very soon the question of the issue of the third edition was raised. It was completed in 1987 and consisted of 7 volumes and 11 books. Today the time has come to put out in

Russia the full standard UDC, since in all previous editions some classes were presented only selectively.

One of the first monographs dealing with the UDC was published in our country, anticipating for some decades the books of such well-known authors as K.Fill and R.Dubuc. We have here in mind a book which today is seldom remembered: "*The Decimal Classification and the Systematic Catalogue*" by N.N.Rusinov, put out in 1931. Our foreign colleagues were not aware of its existence and it is with bitterness that we now learn that the book was forgotten in our country at the time, when the UDC was being widely introduced and there was a lack of serious literature, which would have revealed not only elementary truths (the translation of the tool by Peter Herrmann served well enough in this sphere), but also the creative potentials of the classifier working with the UDC.

3. Development of a Domestic Scheme

The third direction of classification practice in our country is connected with the developing of our domestic classification system. We could devote a lot of time to the history of our LBC. There were in this field many scientific discussions and unfortunately, there raged a secret and invisible battle between persons of different convictions, a battle in which there were victims of the repressions of the 30s. A lot of things happened then: articles and books were eliminated and everybody felt the weight of administrative pressure. (With the passing of time, it became clear that many shortcomings of the LBC were connected with the haste with which it was worked out and the permanent pressure and urging on the part of officials of all levels.) It is not at all surprising that many years were spent on the development of the LBC, for the tasks were extremely complex and many things were being done for the first time. As early as 1930, L.N.Tropovskiy predicted that work on the LBC would take many years, and he listed all the problems its developers would have to solve. Attempts to conduct this work on a collective basis were made a number of times - in 1934, 1936, 1937, 1943, etc. And many things were done successfully by the collective, which in the late forties was headed by E.I.Shamurin. However, direct work on the LBC began only in the 50s and is connected with the name of the chief editor of the LBC, Olga Pankratyevna Teslenko (1911-1974). This work resulted in the tables for research libraries in 25 issues and 30 books (1961-1968) which formed the basis for the creation of a system of variants of the tables: abridged tables for research libraries (7 books, 1971-1975); tables for public libraries (draft of 1970, tables since 1977); for children's and school libraries (since 1978); tables for regional libraries (in 4 volumes, 1980-1983), and tables for catalogues of books on local lore (1989). Over a hundred issues of supplements and amendments to different variants were published and many sections were fully revised. Today the LBC is going through a state of truly historical transformation, connected with the overcoming of ideological distortions in its structure and content.

4. Russia's Possible Further Contributions

Russian literature on knowledge organization has been well registered bibliographically. Thanks to the Abstracts Journal of VINITI we receive also information on the activities of our foreign colleagues. Foreign classification experience has been seriously studied in our country for over 60 years now. Thus one of the first critical articles on the Bliss Classification was published by I.G.Khanjan in the collection "*Soviet Bibliography*" as early as 1937, and in the thirties E.I.Shamurin delivered a cycle of lectures at the Moscow Library Institute on the history of classification. We have at our disposal an enormous collection of works by our philosophers devoted to the problem of the classification of the sciences and its connection with the classification of documents. The first book on this theme was put out in Russia as early as 1921 and it was written by Nikolai Nikolayevich Ablov. The works of B.M.Kedrov, K.V.Ostrovityanov, M.V.Bagrad and of many other scholars are also well known.

The limits of my report do not permit me to enumerate many other names, works and phenomena. Too many works remained unpublished in our country and are now lost for us forever. Here I will cite just one example. In 1966, at the VNIKI, Vladimir Alexeyevich Mishin prepared a report on the theme "*Demands imposed on classification by libraries*" (10 author's sheets, approx. 300 sources in the list of literature). The work is absolutely unique in its significance, but all attempts to publish it failed, so that in the end only 40 copies were put out, causing this book to be a bibliographical rarity today.

During the discussion of our paper in Darmstadt at the 1st International ISKO Conference, the fact was confirmed that the decisions proposed in our country during the creation of an automated system using the element-by-element search through LBC numbers are absolutely original and have no analogs in world practice. However, our projects are not widely known abroad and at times we are too modest in our assessment of our works, not even daring to suppose that in some things and in some fields we can surpass our foreign colleagues. Fortunately, they hold quite a different view on the subject.

In our paper we dwelt only on classification aspects. Yet there is no doubt that the history of subject indexing in Russia is equally interesting. However, it likewise has not been studied profoundly enough. Only the first steps have been taken: primary bibliographical information has been collected and the problem awaits the attention of its researchers.

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