

Soviet Serials - What Next?

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1991 has got off to a sorry start as regards Soviet subscription and serial supply. The phasing out and removal of governmental subsidies from the publishing world; significant airmail charges on most journals; the cessation of many titles, inordinate publication delays; a proliferation of missing issues and claims; and then the real bombshell: the collapse and disappearance of that most respected company - indeed the Rolls Royce of suppliers - Les Livres Etrangers.

So, what have the rest of the year and the future got to offer for library holdings, budgets and work loads? Well, it doesn't take a genius to say: "Times are going to be tough"! After all, many a library is going to face a period of transition, of trying to establish new working relations with alternative suppliers, all of whom will try to offer the same kind of service that the past - and LLE - could offer; and this at a time when the Soviet publishing world is under severe strain. Paper shortages; printing facilities facing and making new demands; the breakdown of the old order without a firmly evolved and structured alternative; disillusion with the old supply mechanisms and as yet no viable and developed replacements - all these aspects are being experienced within the USSR and are exported to us, consumers, in the West and elsewhere.

As to the trends.

I see some of them as follows:

The dual trend away from and then back towards Mezkhkniga as a source of supply. It might be that, while some publishers might currently view it as preferable to "go it alone", many could find to their cost that the Western book trade is no easy nut to crack, and also that the cost of supplying individual customers with the odd single copy order could as likely as not prove, over time, to be much more trouble than it's worth. The often criticised Mezkhkniga - very often unjustly in my view - could well have its role reaffirmed and consolidated.

Exchanges seem in places not to be what they were, since certain Soviet partners appear to be tending towards wanting payment for the books they send. In one reported case, the partner apparently wanted payment AND free books. Well you can't blame them for trying!

Printing quality is likely to remain very patchy for a long time. A recent standard work, for example, was seen to have been printed on 6 different types of newsprint, and we, ourselves, have been requested to

supply paper for a co-edition we have been discussing.

Delays on serials and periodicals are not likely to diminish in the short term. More titles will disappear as the publishing houses are restructured into limited companies and budget constraints figure all the more highly.

On the other hand, the range of interesting publications should continue to grow, as new archives open up and greater cross-fertilisation of cultures occurs. With this should come an increased growth in reference materials covering business contacts and new opportunities. At the same time there will undoubtedly be more publications reflecting the increasingly polarised nature of Soviet society. Polemic will continue within the newspapers to a heightened degree.

And then what?

Your guess is as good as mine.

One can only hope for the best.

But back to the supply of Soviet publications: Are we likely to see any more joint venture publications, like "Nashe Nasledie (Our Heritage)", the comprehensive directory "All Moscow" (among the more successful) and Maxwell Communications' Moscow News (an early casualty of perhaps misplaced enthusiasms)? Almost certainly, and their role is, I think, to be welcomed, bringing as they do quality production and a far more contemporary (dare I say Western) feel.

At the same time, as is clear from the productions of Knizhnaia Palata, prices are going to rise. The days of cheap Soviet books are virtually over. This will affect us all, and, I fear, consumers primarily will need to face this unpleasant fact. For the supplier of one-off imported publications that have been kept on file for several years, each title invoiced will need to pay its way. No one else must share the fate of LLE.

For us at Collets, taking over as agreed the LLE database of back orders for monographs and serials (and despite the difficulties outlined above), we intend to strengthen even further our already solid and reliable service. Bolstered by certain experienced staff from LLE, we shall try to ensure that library holdings are kept intact, while continuing to seek as broad a sourcing of Slavic and East & Central European materials as possible. Given the uncertainties of supply in all these areas, we've certainly quite a job to do. □