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Russian Peasant Letters
Life and Times
of a 19th-century Family

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	vii
Introduction	1
Guide for the reader	7
Chronology of letters and events	9
Chapter one: Letter texts	21
Chapter two: People and places	
A. The three families	187
Aa. The Bekhterev family	
Ab. The Rodigin family	
Ac. The Stefanov/Zherno/akov family	
B. The two villages	204
Ba. Pazdery	
Bb. Sharkan	
Indices	
A. Personal names	209
B. Place names	237
Measures and weights	240
Sources cited	241
Illustrations	247

Introduction

The letters and this edition

Interest in the human documents represented by the writings of “common folk” — people largely ignorant of the literary culture of their society — has been steadily rising since the last decades of the 20th century. This collection is one such body of texts from late 19th-century Russia. The original letters, authored by members of a single peasant family, are located at the Tyumén’ branch of the Russian State Archive, in the Western Siberian capital of Tyumén’ Province (*oblast’*). The letters were written between 1881 and 1896 in the southern part of the former Vyátka Province (*guberniia*), which lay to the West of the Ural mountains, the range separating Southern Vyatka (presently the Udmurtia Republic) from Western Siberia. The precise location of the letters’ origin is spread over several villages and towns; most of them were written in the village of Pazderý, but other locations include Vótkinsk, Sarápul, Sharkán, as well as several river ports along the Káma, Bélaya, and Volga rivers, and even on boats. All but five letters were written by the members of an ethnically Russian Orthodox “state peasant” family (with some of their roots traceable to Tartar ancestors), writing to the second son Vasily (after his marriage, the address also includes his wife, and, still later, even his little sons), who in 1881, at the age of 17, left home for Siberia to earn money. The remaining five letters were written to the oldest son Alekséy, who had left home some time before his brother Vasily but returned to live with the family in 1883. The collection also includes four telegrams. The main authors of the letters were the parents Lavr and Elizavéta, their two sons Iván and Gavriíl, and their daughter Tatyana. The inclusion among the writers of two women provides us with a bulk of rare examples of female peasant writing in late Imperial Russia. The precise number of letter pages written by each letter-writer is impossible to state, because sometimes several siblings added a few lines each, and a few pages in some of the letters were written by other members of the extended family. The main letter-writers and addressees are:

Letter-writers	The father Lavr Andréyevich Zhernakóv (b. 1836)
	The mother Elizavéta Dimitrievna Zhernakóva (b. 1839)
	The third son Ivan Lávrovich Zhernakóv (b. 1867)
	The fifth son Gavriíl Lávrovich Zhernakóv (b. 1872)
	The daughter Tatyana Lávrovna Zhernakóva (b. 1876)
Addressees	The oldest son Alekséy Lávrovich Zhernakóv (b. 1862)
	The second son Vasily Lávrovich Zhernakóv (b. 1864)

The collection is catalogued as “*Fond I-134, opis’ 1, delo 1*”, and consists of 197 hand-written folio pages (*listy*), most folia written on both sides. The character size differs from almost 2 cm to 1 mm, and the paper size and quality varies greatly as well. The ease of decipherment (and hence its reliability) was not uniform in all cases: some portions of the text are covered by paper of varying degrees of opacity, pasted on the margins in order either to fortify the margins or to attach the letters to

the document folder; not infrequently, such passages had to be deciphered using an additional light source and/or magnification. Magnification and additional light also aided the task of decipherment in cases when ink bled through the paper. Occasionally, the paper was sufficiently damaged for a fragment to be missing altogether. The reconstruction in such cases was based, when possible, either on independent research (e.g., determining a personal name in a missing fragment from church records), or on linguistic and/or contextual considerations.

Scribes and the voices of the authors

The custom of using scribes, familiar to readers of Russian literature through Chekhov's and, later, Zoshchenko's stories, receives ample empirical support from this collection. The texts of the letters signed by the father and/or by the mother are usually written by hands that are different from the signatures. In the course of research in the archives of the Republic of Udmurtia and of Kirov Province, we were able to identify some of the formally unidentified scribes, while others still await identification. We were able to determine that in those cases when the scribes signed their names, they were usually not outsiders, but members of the larger extended family. This shows the importance of family connections in this peasant community. It also calls for establishing the scribe as another insider present at – and potentially affecting – the communicative act represented by the epistolary discourse recorded in these letters. When noteworthy, evidence of the influence of such an insider/third-party presence is pointed out in the footnotes. The need to show respect to the scribes, or at least an awareness of their adjunct presence in the communicative process, complicates the well-known problem associated with the employment of scribes, i.e., that of assessing the extent of the contribution of the person signing the letter to the content and the language of the letter text. This problem was dealt with in this collection by comparing the language, style, and content of letters signed by the same name but written in different hands; features common to all of the mother's or all of the father's letters, across different scribal hands, were considered to originate from the respective letter-writers rather than from the scribes. Overall, the letters show that the voices of the dictating parties were preserved by the scribes remarkably well, despite the literary stereotypes the fictionalized scribal letters mentioned above may call to mind. The paucity of texts written in the father's and the mother's own hands makes it difficult, of course, to assess the parents' real level of literacy. (It is noteworthy that in the national census record of 1897 they both identify themselves as “self-taught [and] literate”).

The history and preservation of the collection

The collection remained unknown to scholars until 2001. Its archival life began in 1920, when the letters appeared in the Omsk State Archive. In 1945, they were transferred to the Tyumén' State Archive. The OSA has no record of their provenance, but it is reasonable to speculate that they were brought to Omsk from Tyumen' by the main addressee of the letters, V.L. Zhernakóv. By the early 20th century he had become a Hereditary Honorary Citizen, a well-known entrepreneur

and phil-anthropist in Tyumén', with considerable ventures in Omsk as well (Zueva and Skubnevskii 1995, 19-20). He fled Tyumén' in the late summer of 1918, escaping from the revolutionary army, and for a while settled in Omsk, where the counter-revolutionary government of General Kolchák was based in 1918-1919. It is difficult to imagine who except VL would have saved and filed these letters addressed to him over the years. Our guess is also supported by the fact that on the top of the first page of some letters there is a record of the date of receipt of the letter, sometimes accompanied by the abbreviated word *poluch* 'receiv(ed)' (e.g., L194). The hand is that of VL; his handwriting was identified by us from later documents (e.g., a 1911 application for primary school admission for VL's son Nikolai; TSA I-92.2.76, 1).

If our assumption about VL's role in the preservation of the letters is correct, we can begin to speculate what caused VL to collect precisely these, and not other letters which must have been received by him from his family over the years. It is important to ask this question, in order to try to understand the significance of the letters' content, and through that, in some cases at least, to reach an understanding of their referential world. When one examines the content of the letters, several possible reasons for saving them suggest themselves: their sheer entertainment value, their sentimental value (e.g., the emotional attachment some charming letters from younger siblings were likely to foster in the older brother), and pride, i.e., the gratification VL may have experienced in keeping the letters, as a record of the upward mobility of his family, who went from being some of the poorest peasants in the village to successful entrepreneurs and even, in part, members of the intelligentsia (in the case of his sister). Our archival research has revealed, moreover, that some of the letters (and telegrams) were records of certain momentous events in the lives of the family members. Perhaps the collector was objective enough to have a sense of the human drama encapsulated in the letters of the common folk his kin represented.

It is not clear whether the original collection continued beyond 1896. If the collection actually stopped at that date, this may be related to the fact that the funeral records of both parents and of the two brother authors were discovered to be in Tyumén': evidently, at least four out of the five main writers of the letters eventually moved across the Urals to join VL, and their lives ended in that West Siberian city. Perhaps the correspondence stopped because there was no longer any need to communicate by mail. On the other hand, no mention of such a planned major move is found in the last letters of the collection, suggesting that the move did not take place any time soon after 1896. Moreover, no trace of the youngest of the writers, the daughter TL, was found in Tyumén'. She very likely never moved to that city. Given that she was the best represented author in the latter part of the collection, it is doubtful that she stopped writing letters worth saving after 1896, while continuing to live far away from her brother VL. The situation remains unresolved, leaving open the possibility that somewhere in Russia a continuation of these letters may yet be found. Moreover, there surely must have been correspondence between VL and his oldest brother AL, as implied at several points in the corpus (e.g., L15). The total

absence of letters from AL in this collection suggests that his letters were saved and filed separately, perhaps because they were more business-related and were important in a different way.

Importance of the letters: language, literacy, history, culture

The letters constitute an invaluable source for studying the language and life of Russian peasants in the late 19th century, covering the entire reign of Alexander III and the first two years of his successor Nicholas II. The letters are unique in several respects, their sheer volume being only the most obvious one. The collection represents a primary source containing remarkable examples of near-illiterate and semi-literate writing by dialect speakers, which shows a host of linguistic features never before documented for this era and this segment of Russian society. In this respect, this material is to be distinguished from a handful of writings by formerly illiterate Russians. The memoirs of the Tyumén' (and, later, Moscow) merchant Nikolai Chukmaldin (1836-1901), a contemporary of the parent generation of the authors in this collection, were written when he was already fully literate, and for the purpose of publication (Chukmaldin 1899). He even did freelance writing for several newspapers in St. Petersburg, Yekaterinburg, Tobol'sk, and Tyumén'. Even further removed from incipient literacy are other memoirs, such as those by another former peasant, Semen Kanatchikov (1879-1940), a contemporary of the children's generation of the writers in this collection. A Marxist activist born in a village near Moscow, he eventually attained the post of university president. These works were written to be read by the world, and their language is defined by their concern not to violate literary norms and their self-consciousness with respect to the reader. The letters in our collection, in contrast, were never intended to be read by anyone other than the addressees, or at least not by people outside the extended family circle.

Although deviations from the spelling norms of the time abound on every page, the authors, quite remarkably, were careful writers who unmistakably showed sensitivity to stylistic variation, despite the widely accepted notion of the absence of stylistic differentiation in peasant language. Even the translations allow us to observe the process of the acquisition of literacy in the case of the three youngsters, whose letters from different ages constitute the bulk of the collection, showing their progress from rudimentary to – in the case of the daughter – a nearly full command of the written literary language. The texts in this collection also document attitudes towards language, and education in general during a time when public education and literacy in Russia were spreading rapidly.

In addition to their linguistic value (for which interested readers are referred to the *editio princeps*, Yokoyama 2008), the importance of the letters as a major resource for scholars working in Peasant Studies must be underscored. The span of almost 16 years covered by the letters allows the researcher to track the development of events and of the people reporting them. The children grow up to be adults, and the adults age and decline. Births, deaths, and marriages occur. The family rises in its economic status, as the stage on which their lives play out their parts shifts from

their home village towards the city and further to the country as a whole. These processes are palpable in the letters, which give us direct and unadorned testimony concerning all aspects of life, as conveyed by family members to other family members, including the writing of two women. A comparison with Olga Semyonova Tian-Shanskaia's *Village Life in Late Tsarist Russia* (1993) makes this point clear: Semyonova Tian-Shanskaia's ethnographic study of village life, one of the very few sources of our knowledge of this subject (and one that includes, notably, information about women), represents her own views on the peasants, as informed by her observation of them in a village setting. The distance between the educated lady-scholar and her subjects is clearly felt, and the peasants' own voices are heard, at best, only as they were occasionally overheard by the author. By contrast, this collection is a primary source, written entirely in the peasants' own voices. The content includes economic and personal news, village and town gossip, parental admonition and prayers, requests for help, intra-family troubles, and simply the authors' pouring out their hearts. The reader learns not only about actual events, but also – significantly – about the writers' views on these events, as expressed explicitly and as can be inferred from evidence susceptible to indirect (but close) analysis of the letters' graphic and linguistic features. So far, these letters have been featured in two historical articles and one article for the general reader. Dolgushina and Kubochkin 2002 introduces Fund I-134.1.1, with excerpts from non-scholarly normalized versions of selected letters. Klyueva 2003 provides a brief historico-cultural analysis of the letters, pointing out the importance of the materials for historians. Kubochkin 2002 partly overlaps with Dolgushina and Kubochkin 2002, supplying additional information on VL's activity in Tyumén' and supplying photographs of the Tyumén' period of VL's life.

Contents of the book

This is an English-only version of Yokoyama 2008, offered to those who may be interested only in the content of the letters and their contexts. The bulk of the book (ch. 1) consists of an English translation of the normalized version of the letter texts and the commentary attached to them. This material requires no knowledge of Russian, and thus provides access to those approaching these documents for their historical, sociological and cultural aspects. The letters are presented chronologically; see "Chronology of letters and events" for a summary. The full commentary to the letters appears in two forms: first, as footnotes to the letter texts themselves (ch. 1), and then in ch. 2, addressing specific referential realities that recur across the letters. All of the commentary is intended as material that can be used by scholars interested in an in-depth study of the content of the letters, or by anyone interested in exploring the subject in greater depth. Name and place indices follow. The name index is annotated in some detail: the purpose of the annotations is to reveal the family- and community-based ties of the personal context of the letters and to provide information about the referents' social position, thus approximating the referential knowledge the authors and readers of the letters

presumably shared with respect to these individuals. The place index is followed by a table of measures and weights, and by bibliographical references. Due to the nature of the subject, almost all of the references are to works in Russian; these are provided primarily to substantiate the commentaries. But there are exceptions: readers without Russian are referred to Fitzpatrick 1990, Munro Butler-Johnstone 1876, Semyonova Tian-Shanskaia 1993, and Yokoyama 2008. The book concludes with illustrations: a map, photographs, and several facsimiles.

It is recommended that the reader first read the “Chronology of Letters and Events”. This will help place the overall picture in perspective. For information on recurring items, footnoted commentary is provided most extensively, and in many cases exclusively, at the first occurrence. When no information is found in a given footnote, or when no footnote is given to an item that seems to be obscure, the name index or the place index should be consulted, which will most probably direct the reader to the first occurrence of the item.

Attribution of information

Finally, a note on the attribution of information is called for. I have tried to credit all information to printed, archival, or internet sources whenever possible. In the process of the final read-through, however, I realized that a portion of my knowledge was impossible to credit, as it always was or had become *mine*. This includes, of course, knowledge gained from the three decades of my scholarly career as a Slavic linguist, as well as my self-training and fieldwork in Slavic folklore, undertaken in the 1990s. (In fact, even my earlier training in pre-medicine and dentistry turned out to be helpful for writing several footnotes.) Also included is knowledge arising from travels undertaken specifically for this project in 2003-2005: I visited the areas named in the letters, seeing the very churches and houses where some of the people in the letters had been, and the fields and rivers they saw and worked in, as I spoke to local strangers on buses and in market places, to old ladies in station waiting rooms, to cab drivers and fellow train-travelers, acquiring in this way background information no less important, in its way, than material that can be credited with a conventional scholarly apparatus. But this is not all. I see now that some of my own personal knowledge, learned by osmosis while growing up in an émigré Russian community in Harbin, amidst thriving pre-revolutionary Russian cultural values that survived anachronistically into the mid-20th century, turned out to be invaluable for understanding the assumptions and implications behind ostensibly trifling details mentioned in the letters, details that sometimes allowed for the plausible reconstruction of vanished contexts. It is this background that led me on occasion to speak with a certain authority on cultural details that I could not and – if I may be permitted – need not reference, since I myself qualify in such cases as my own native informant.

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