
Russia revealed: a Senate House Library case study of special collection promotion



K. E. Attar
currently
Head of Special Collections,
Senate House Library,
University of London
Tel.: 020 7862 8472
E-mail: Karen.attar@london.ac.uk

Special collections can be a double-edged sword. On the one hand they are the jewels that differentiate between libraries at a time when widespread access to electronic resources blurs distinctions. Against that, special collections are expensive, requiring controlled storage conditions and high levels of security, insurance, and curatorial expertise. Thus a new collection must always justify its existence.

This exhilarating challenge faced Senate House Library, University of London, when in 2008 it received the M. S. Anderson collection of writings on Russia printed between 1525 and 1917. The historian Matthew Smith Anderson (1922–2006), Professor of International History at the London School of Economics, assembled the collection between the early 1960s and 2003. It consists of about 1,850 titles, in all the major western European languages, pertaining to perceptions of Russia from the earliest travel writings to the Russian revolution. Travel narratives, many of them sumptuously illustrated, and some other geographies are a major feature. There are also histories (most notably relating to Peter the Great, Catherine the Great, and various conflicts, especially the Crimean War) and works of fiction. Cheap publications – chapbooks, pamphlets, and sixpenny or even twopenny nineteenth-century paperback editions of novels, printed in double columns and small founts – jostle with de luxe volumes. An emphasis on reception led to the presence of multiple editions and translations, such as English, Dutch, Italian, and Spanish

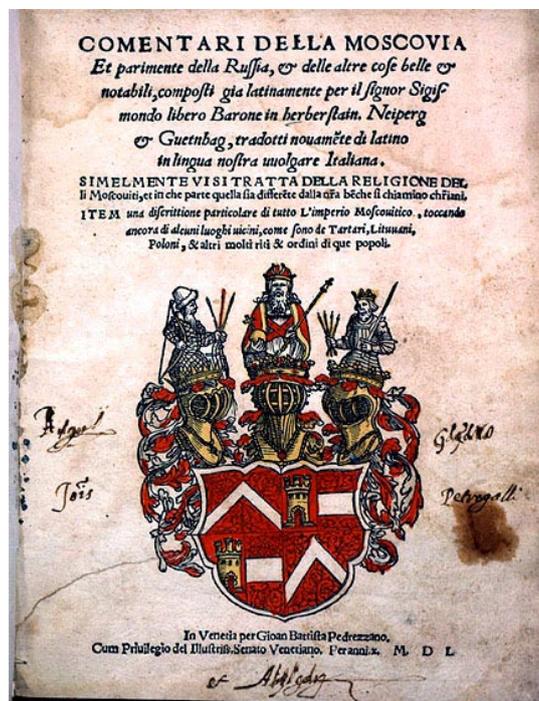
translations of Anatolii Demidov's *Voyage dans la Russie méridionale et la Crimée par la Hongrie, la Valachie et la Moldavie exécuté en 1837* alongside the original French. Several editions are rare: some are recorded online in only one other copy, or not at all, in Great Britain, and a few are unrecorded both in Britain (COPAC) and America (WorldCat). The value was obvious. What was important was to demonstrate that the contents were not merely museum objects but that they promote the library's mission, 'to contribute to the broader mission of the University of London, by providing resources to support research, to the highest international standards, and to support undergraduate and postgraduate learning in a research environment'.¹

Cataloguing commenced shortly after the receipt of the collection. Ultimately, this was the best way for individual books to become known. Catalogue records were regularly uploaded to COPAC, and those for items published to 1830 will be uploaded to the 'Heritage of the Printed Book' (HPB) database of the Consortium of European Research Libraries (CERL).² Upon finishing cataloguing in mid-2009, we reported the 121 records for books published in the English language or in English-speaking countries up to 1800 to the English Short Title Catalogue (ESTC), as a proven way to get our books known to the wider research community.

The cataloguing process alerted us both to eye-catching and to particularly rare books, such as the Danish edition of Claude Carlotman de Rulhière's *Anecdotes sur la révolution de Russie, en l'année 1762* (1797), a work famous for Catherine the Great's efforts to suppress the manuscript, and an eleven-page poem from 1806 by A. Uzanne, *La journée d'Austerlitz*, praising Napoleon as the French national saviour. Cataloguing, however, is slow, and it works on a micro level. From the beginning we wanted to raise awareness of the collection as an entity. Initially we knew too little about it to be able to describe it on our web pages in more than a general paragraph. However, some years earlier we had introduced a web feature, 'Book of the Month', to highlight specific items in special collections: new acquisitions, anniversary volumes, or books which came under the spotlight for any particular reason. This gave us the opportunity to promote specific titles. We chose Frederick Shoberl's *Russia* (R. Ackermann, 1822–3), from his duodecimo series 'The world in miniature', for its illustrations (many of Russian costumes, a leitmotif of the collection). This popular publication had the added advantage of

complementing nicely several expensive folios produced by Rudolph Ackermann that we already held. Several months later we featured one of four editions in the collection of Elizabeth Craven's *A journey through the Crimea to Constantinople* (1789), the earliest record by a female tourist in Russia to venture to the southern provinces. The choice gave us the opportunity to point out the presence of multiple editions in the collection, one of its strengths; and Lady Craven's notoriety in matters matrimonial gave it a racy interest.³

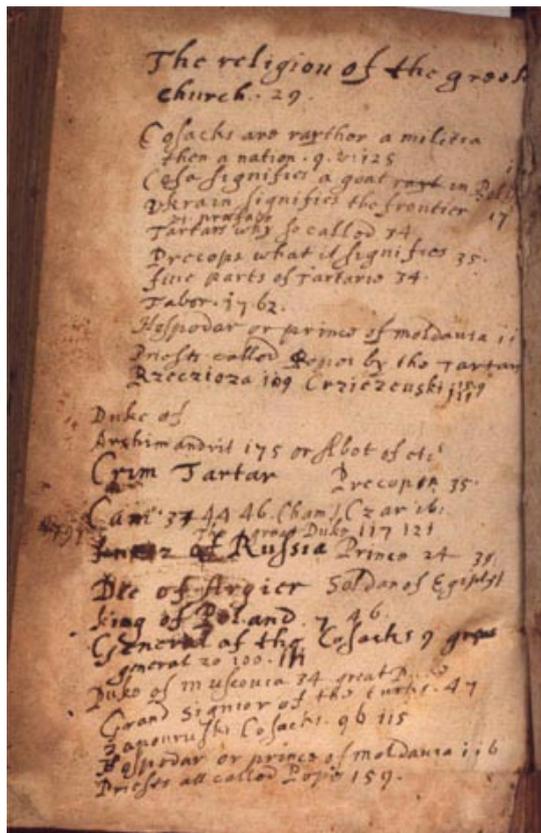
Actual displays supplemented the first tentative web presence. The collector's widow suggested items for display when the collection came to Senate House Library, and this initial display functioned as a declaration of receipt – in a single case, the stage of rewiring and refurbishment in Senate House at the time having temporarily deprived us of a larger display area. The items shown exemplified the collection's variety, as a taster. Exhibits ranged from milestone works to pamphlets, from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries. The most famous was the first Italian translation (1550) of Sigmund von Herberstein's famous *Rerum moscoviticarum commentarii*, a work which in numerous editions and translations formed impressions of Russia for several centuries.



Sigmund von Herberstein, *Comentari della Moscovia* (Venice, 1550), classmark: [M.S. Anderson] 1550

Another landmark was the English translation of Pierre Chevalier's *Discourse of the Cossacks* (1672; the earliest systematic account of the Ukraine or of the Cossacks to appear in English), with an

ownership inscription from 1672 and a seven-teenth-century manuscript partial list of contents at the back.



Pierre Chevalier, *Discourse of the original, countrey, manners, government and religion of the Cossacks* (London, 1672), classmark: [M.S. Anderson] 1672

Especially rare was a black-letter Swedish pamphlet entitled *Lof- och tacksäjelse-skrift öfver den genom Guds hielp och bistånd lyckeligen erhåldna freden, med czaren af Muscow*, a sermon from 1721 thanking God for peace after the Great Northern War. Behind the display case were images from Jean François Gamba's *Atlas: voyage dans la Russie meridionale* (1826), a French picture book with characterful colourful images of Persians in harems, peasants, princesses and so forth.

It was soon realised that reproductions of these images on lettercards could further raise the profile of the collection.

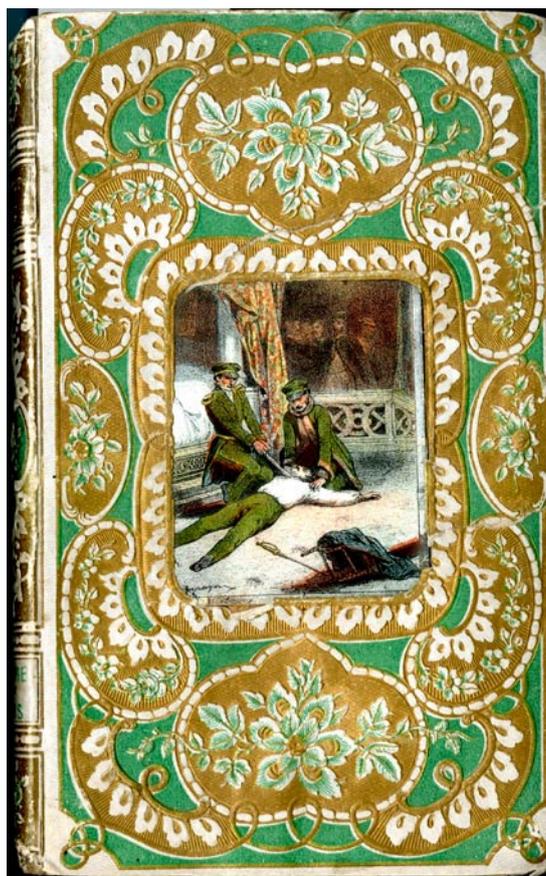
By the time of the second display (two tabletop cases), sorting and cataloguing were in process. While our overview of the collection remained incomplete, order was definitely emerging. The display accompanied and supported an international conference hosted by the Institute of English Studies, one of the Schools of Advanced Study at the University of London, on 'Russia in Britain, 1880–1940'. Library staff scanned the shelves for



Jean François Gamba, *Atlas: voyage dans la Russie méridionale* (Paris, 1826), classmark: [M.S. Anderson] 1826

a range of works from 1880 onwards, from which the conference organisers made a final selection. This display included pamphlets by writers who were important in raising British awareness of Russia (the industrialist Edward Cazalet, the scholar Charles Sarolea, and the revolutionary Jakoff Prelooker). Works of popular fiction constituted a major strand, such as a sixpenny edition of *For God and the Czar* by the prolific J. E. Muddock (who, as Dick Donovan, authored detective and mystery stories), written to 'lay bare the rottenness of Russia'. Another element pertained to the First World War, from an Oxford vicar's description of his journey home from Petrograd, where he was stranded in 1914 following a holiday chaplaincy, to a 1916 pamphlet by the London firm R. Martens & Co. seeking to encourage British exports to Russia. As conference delegates cannot be relied upon to venture from conference rooms to library space, we displayed scans from several of the exhibited books on panels in the main conference venue. We hoped thereby not merely to enrich the conference experience but to draw a future research resource to their attention. The third of our smaller displays, 'Bound to sell', was of striking Victorian bindings. Most were pictorial cloth, but there was also the only electronically recorded copy in Great Britain of the second

edition of Jean Marlès's *Histoire de Russie depuis l'origine de la monarchie jusqu'à nos jours* (Tours, 1857), with a coloured picture of cut-throats inlaid on green, gold and white patterned boards.

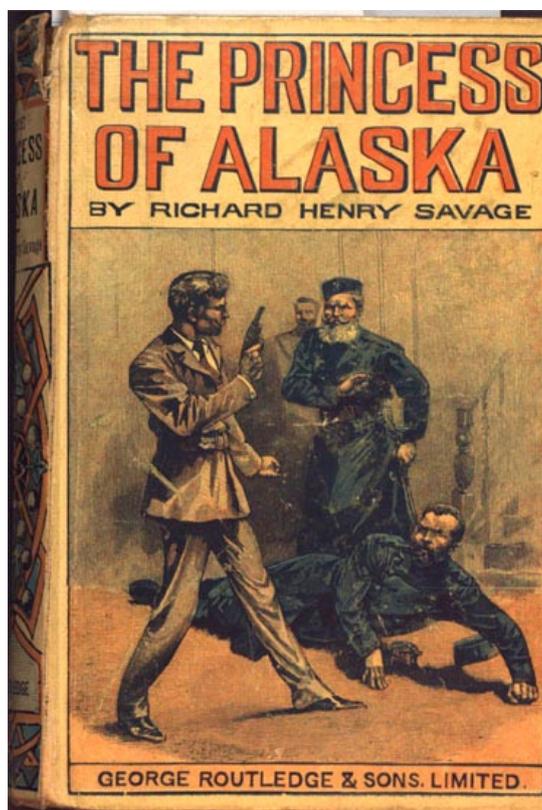


Jean de Marlès, *Histoire de Russie depuis l'origine de la monarchie jusqu'à nos jours, nouvelle édition* (Tours, 1857), classmark: [M.S. Anderson] 1857

This book subsequently featured in a lecture to show changing perspectives of Russian personalities in textbook-like works: Catherine the Great, who had wooed France assiduously and successfully during her reign from 1762 to 1797, receives just a single sentence in the book's biography of tsars, 'Elle meurt après un règne agité de 34 ans, le 16 novembre' (p. 187; this contrasts with twenty lines devoted to Peter the Great). Intended for general visual appeal, the display as a whole had the added benefit of supporting the M.A. in the History of the Book at the Institute of English Studies, which includes an option on 'the look of the book'.⁴

Use of the collection to support teaching came with the London Rare Books School (LRBS). This international summer school, run by the Institute of English Studies, offers week-long courses on various aspects of book history, such as publishing from the fifteenth to the twenty-first century, bookbindings, maps, and children's books. Teaching is conducted at several libraries and empha-

sises contact with books. Senate House Library, as well as that of the host institution, plays a major role. Rather than requesting specific titles, tutors often want examples of books to demonstrate various formats, illustrative techniques, and so on. Items from the M. S. Anderson collection supplied examples for several courses: of formats from folio to duodecimo, of a yellowback, of binding structures, of Victorian pictorial binding, of nineteenth-century photography as book illustration, and of illustrations fully integrated with text. The yellowbacks in the collection have special interest for students. As cheap publications, often of sensational works, they do not have an automatic home in academic libraries. Their glazed pictorial covers, eye-catching when new, are often battered now.



Richard Henry Savage, *The princess of Alaska* (London, 1895), classmark: [M.S. Anderson] 1895

The yellowbacks in the M. S. Anderson collection are in remarkably good condition, and fascinate students in the flourishing field of Victorian literature for their prominent advertisements for Fry's cocoa, pianos and soap.

The pinnacle of publicity came in March 2010, with a collection launch, to which historians of Russia among others were invited, consisting of a fifty-minute introductory lecture about the collection and a nine-case exhibition. The latter, which contained an explanatory paragraph for each item

and which selected items to display a range of countries and dates of publication and types of material, continued after the launch, and supplanted the original holding text on the library's web pages. A description of the collection in a Slavonic journal is desired to reach out to relevant scholars, to supplement the important but essentially less proactive web presence. Consultation of the collection for a current Cambridge-based bibliographical project funded by the Leverhulme Trust, 'Under the Romanovs: an annotated bibliography of English-language first-hand accounts of Russia from 1613 to 1917', should help to bring it to the scholarly community. Digitisation of selected items could be a vision for the future.

Our experience of the M. S. Anderson collection of writings on Russia was a salutary reminder that publicity is possible before a library knows much about a collection. Afterwards, for a collection that merits the exploitation, time is the only limitation.

REFERENCES

- 1 Senate House Library, <http://www.shl.lon.ac.uk/>
- 2 <http://firstsearch.oclc.org/>
- 3 She was estranged from her husband following marital infidelity on both sides. The Journey consists of her letters to the margrave of Brandenburg-Ansbach-Bayreuth, whom she married two days after learning of her first husband's death. See K. Turner, 'Elizabeth, margravine of Brandenburg-Ansbach-Bayreuth ...', in Oxford dictionary of national biography, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, online edn, May 2005 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com.catalogue.ulrls.lon.ac.uk/view/article/576>]
- 4 Course described at: <http://ies.sas.ac.uk/study/MAHOB/index.htm>