The Editorial Policy as a Mirror of Petrine Reforms: Textbooks and Their Translators in Early 18th Century Russia

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Abstract. Peter I’s editorial policy appears as a starting point in the birth of secular Russian textbooks. Since the printing production was then organized on a massive scale as a response to the needs of European-like modernization, it should be safely suggested that nearly all books produced during this pioneering period focused teaching objectives. To understand how and why such an impressive cultural blossoming could occur, we must study their history as part of the broad process of the transfer of knowledge that interfered in all the domains of Russian life. As the textbooks were essentially the product of translation, the paper will explore four main points: Who were the translators? What and why did they translate? How did they proceed? What were their main problems and achievements?

1. Lexicological Introduction

The usual Russian equivalent of “textbook” is “učebnik” (from učit’ = to teach), commonly designated as “a book meant for the teaching of any school matter”. According to the same Dictionary of Modern Russian Literary Language, its first fixed use dates from 1847. So, even more than “textbook” (which dates back to 1730 and gained its modern sense by 1779), this word is anachronistic to the epoch of Peter I concerned in this paper. Research for our paper showed that there was not then one specific word to design a book for teaching, but many different words and expressions emphasizing this specific function. Such words were: “vvedenie” (introduction), “rukovedenie” or “rukovodstvo” (guide), “kniga učaša” (teaching book), “ugotovanie i tolkovanie āsnoc” (clear preparation and explanation), and so on. Very often, these words were coupled with the adjectives “kratkij” or “kratcāsij” (concise, very concise). Such a great variety of terms testifies in itself of the profusion of teaching literature. And it was, in fact, the period within which the very notion of textbook, if not the modern word itself, gained its modern sense. Moreover, all the main meanings of “textbook” were already implicitly present (at least in a
rudimentary form), be it: “a book containing a usual systematic presentation of the principles and vocabulary of a subject”, “a book recording the historical development of a subject”, “collection of writings of various authors dealing with a concrete subject” or even “an authoritative work devoted to the global coverage of a subject”. If we add that a pocket book was also introduced in Russia during this period, and that its characteristics fits with the sense of “conceit treatise which aimed to bridge theoretical or divine knowledge with everyday practice”, it should follow that the notion of “handbook” should also be convenient. So, in spite of the fact that both “textbook” and “handbook” have no precise equivalents in the 18th century Russian, they are good research tools for our study.

2. Petrine Textbooks as the Challenge of Modernization

Even if the first textbooks appeared in Russia long before the late 17th century, it would hardly be a mistake to consider Peter I’s reign as a period of their true birth. The argument is both of quantitative and qualitative character. The ancient Moscovy produced very few textbooks, and they were elementary spelling- and prayer-books, mostly manuscript or printed in ancient Slavonic. During the Petrine epoch, their printed production was organized on a massive scale and concerned the main branches of secular scholar training (general as well as special) created at the national level. It may be safely suggested that in varying ways, nearly all books printed during this pioneering period focused teaching objectives. Paradoxically, the sources dealing with Russian textbooks pay them small attention. Hypothetically, we can suggest that the limited definition of “учебник” as a book designed for the school needs prevented from considering as teaching a huge amount of items, mostly translated from foreign languages, which didactic function was not clearly specified.

To clarify this situation, we must study the early Russian secular textbooks as part of the wide modernization project which aimed to transform Russia into a powerful and technically advanced absolutist imperial European-like State. Economically speaking, it entailed a global reorganization of the principal technical systems and the development of industrial and commercial infrastructures. Politically speaking, it involved a deep reshaping of the ancient Muscovite civilization which close and contemplative character was incompatible with the dynamisation of intellectual and social life. A specific historical conjunction made this process abnormally fast, tense and testing, because the very idea of modernization was born from military needs. Two conflicts played an essential role in the emergence and strengthening of this policy: the Azov campaigns against the Turks (1695–96), which showed to the tsar how obsolete his military techniques