

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Lending Libraries and Cheap Books

Sophie Kropotkin

January 1904

Much has been written lately in condemnation of the free libraries, on the ground that they were chiefly used by those who cared only for light reading, and that the more serious books were rarely in demand. It is quite true that out of each six books taken during the year from the free library five will be novels. But it would be quite unfair to take no notice of the considerable number of more serious books that are read as well. Taking, for instance, the annual report of our Bromley Library, I see that during the last twelve months more than seven thousand books have been borrowed from the departments of “theology and philosophy,” “biography and history,” “travels and topography,” and “laws, commerce, politics, &c.” This is certainly a quite respectable figure, the more so as our library contains, all taken, only 5875 volumes in all these departments, to which 120 volumes only were added during the last twelve months. It must also be said that the very wide division of “laws, commerce, politics, &c.,” which surely would have been in great demand during the last few years, is represented in the library by 260 odd volumes, and that only *live* new

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Retrieved on 30th May 2024 from
www.libertarian-labyrinth.org

Published in *The Nineteenth Century* vol. 55, no. 323, pp. 69–78.

theanarchistlibrary.org

books have found their way to the shelves of this department during the last twelve months (as against 280 in the branch of “prose fiction”).

Besides, it seems to me that the *role* of the free libraries has not been quite understood in these discussions, and that the poor reader has been unjustly censured. It would be perhaps more correct to say that the free libraries have fulfilled their function admirably, as they have developed a taste for reading, and have powerfully contributed to create a quite new class of readers, especially in the young generation. No very deep investigation is required, indeed, to show that the love of reading has greatly increased wherever free lending libraries have been opened—one has only to look attentively at the scores and hundreds of people who come every day to the libraries to take books. And if these readers have a decided taste for novels, these novels are certainly of a better sort than the penny dreadfuls or the *Police News*, which were formerly so widely read amidst this class of readers. Busy people, who have little time for reading after a day’s work, must first be brought into the habit of caring for a book: in their spare time, and this is generally done by light reading. Besides, let us not forget what quantities of novels have been absorbed in youth by every one of us. Nowadays the novel is the young people’s way of learning something about the world and its ways.

To create in the reading public a love for a higher order of books is certainly an urgent necessity; but for this purpose something else besides the lending library is necessary—I mean cheap editions of serious books. It is a fact that books of a serious character cannot be read quickly, and a volume borrowed from a lending library cannot be kept for months. If it takes a philosophically trained man more than a month to read a volume of Spencer or Darwin, in order that he may properly understand and assimilate to some extent the teaching, how much more necessary is it for the average reader of the free

try in Europe, but to us it seems just the contrary.” To this quite natural remark I can only reply by referring the reader to what he may find in the Russian free press abroad. He will see then that all the educational movement in Russia is very young—it dates from the abolition of serfdom only; and he will notice, perhaps even with some admiration, what a struggle the initiators of education, of libraries, and of everything that tends to progress, have had to maintain during these last forty years against the regressive tendencies of an autocratic government. Government prosecutions in matters pertaining to education and the press have been a long and great tragedy in Russian life.

they had struck by offering good, varied, and serious reading to the great public—these few have compelled the others to follow suit, and at the present time a Russian publisher is bound to ask himself, first of all, to what public he means to appeal; and if he is going to publish a book of popular science, sociology, or ethnography which can appeal to a wide circle of readers, he knows that he must publish it at a price of two or three shillings—never higher than five shillings—but that he can also reckon in return upon a sale of about ten thousand copies or more. I know that there are now a few publishers and publishing associations which do excellent work in this direction in this country as well; but there is no reason why the same should not be done on a much larger scale, not for old books only, but for new books as well, and why all the treasures of knowledge which have been accumulated in other countries within the last fifty years should not be brought out, so as to render them accessible to the great mass of the English people—why the little country towns and villages of England should not be flooded, just as the German villages are, and the Russian villages begin to be, with a specially written popular literature dealing with all possible branches of human knowledge, and sold—perhaps by special pedlars—at the price of a very few pence—not more than two or three. No amount of laws for the protection of birds and their nests could do so much as an attractively published book about birds and their habits on the cottager's bookshelf. It is not in the nature of a child to be cruel to creatures with whom he is familiar. And most certainly many branches of land culture, and small industries too, would not have been in the precarious state in which they are now if the needs of the cottagers had been approached by disinterested publishers—not merely in a mercantile or narrow chapel spirit, but with an intelligently sympathetic mind.

And now some readers of this article will surely make an ironical remark, somewhat in these words: “Well, according to what we are told, Russia ought to be the most enlightened coun-

lending library to have plenty of time for the comprehension of such books?

I have often heard French working men say: “I cannot read a serious book from a public library; I must pick it up second-hand. Then I read it at my leisure, which is generally at night only, when all is quiet, when the family is asleep; and even that I cannot do every day. Very often when I am reading a borrowed book, part of it leads me to consult another book; so I try to get this second book from the library. Sometimes I can get it, sometimes not. If I succeed in getting it, and have read what I want, I then go back to the library for the first book, and as often as not it is out. No, I must have the book upon my own shelf.” That is really how it ought to be.

Books of serious matter must be the property of the reader. Even to a good novel we all like to refer occasionally, and it is the same with a book of poems; but still more is this the case with a book more or less scientific. To such a book we should have the facility to refer constantly and on all sorts of occasions. It may be that we want to read a passage from it to a friend with whom we have a discussion, or we may look in the book for a point to be used in argument at a meeting, or else we are anxious to get a general idea before going to hear a lecture, or we may want to compare the ideas of one writer with those of some other writer on the same subject. Only in this way we learn to fully understand an author and to appreciate books. Good books must be a possession, if it be only to open one of them in some idle moment, to read a few lines at random, to pencil upon the margin our own observation, even though it be only to remark “How beautiful!” or a mere sign of interrogation.

The free lending libraries are undoubtedly developing the taste for books; but are English books cheap enough for the reader with small means to buy them? The stream of good books in cheap editions, published of late in this country, has been a most encouraging symptom, and the appearance of any

good book in a shilling or a sixpenny edition has been greeted with delight by all serious readers. But we claim more from the publishers. First, the price of some of these books must be still further reduced, and we welcome the pretty shilling edition of Darwin's *Origin of Species*, even though we have had (since 1901 only!) a halfcrown edition of the same work; secondly, the cheap books should be of a library shape; thirdly, the cheap edition should not be kept until years and years after the more expensive one has been in circulation, as is now the case. This last is a most important point, for every keen reader wishes to have the book while it is spoken about, and while the reviews are calling attention to its merits. Furthermore, there should be the means for circulating cheap editions of serious books in the country, so that even in small provincial towns new books should be brought under the eyes of the would-be buyers. The high price of most serious books has been until lately the chief obstacle in the way of spreading good educational literature in England, and the great majority of excellent works that came out during the last half-century still remains very expensive. The English publisher seldom realizes how unjust he is, not only to the reader and the writer, but to himself, in bringing out only expensive editions of such books, which in a cheap form could be sold by the thousand instead of by the hundred. It would be extremely interesting to know the exact number of copies of the half-crown edition of Darwin's more popular works, and especially the shilling edition, that have been sold lately, as compared with the previous editions; but, failing these figures, we may perhaps take as a striking example in point the sixpenny edition of Tolstoy's *Resurrection*: 130,000 copies of it were sold last winter, while of the beautifully illustrated six-shilling edition only a few thousand copies have been sold in the course of two years.

In France, in Germany, but especially in Russia, the publishers understand perfectly, well the advantage of cheap publications, and a vast amount of books, marvellously cheap and

Petersburg and Moscow is of the latest improved type and of the very first quality. It requires some good machinery to bring out the above-mentioned illustrated weekly, with all its supplements, admirably printed, in 200,000 copies every week; and everyone, however slightly acquainted with printing matters, will understand that no reduction in the wages would effect on the printing the economies which are effected by driving all the year round the most perfect machinery, and by issuing editions in hundreds of thousands of copies. Besides, are not the pretty shilling editions of the World's Classics (even without the usual soap and corn-flour advertisements to spoil them) the best proof that printing, paper, and bookbinding are not so awfully expensive in England, provided the proper style of publishing be chosen, the proper machinery be used—and the intention of having cheap books be there?

As to the authors and the translators, they are not, as a rule, paid less than here, and they are often paid better. In England, occasionally, a popular novelist or an explorer—someone who makes a sensation—may get a large sum for his book; but the majority, we find, are paid less than the average Russian writer gets for his work. So that in this case the question of cheap labor may be left out. The secret of success in this kind of enterprise has lain in the demand for cheap books on behalf of a wide class of educated people possessed of but modest means, but chiefly in the initiative of a few publishers who really wanted to spread education broadcast amidst the masses, and, having begun to bring out cheap editions of favorite authors, compelled the other publishers to adopt the same system. I have named one of them, Kozhflntchikoff, but I ought to name quite a number of men and women publishers, as well as publishing societies, who have worked in the same direction with the same intention.

These few, who began their publishing activity with the desire of spreading knowledge, and whose publishing business was increased from year to year as they saw what a rich mine

There is scarcely any branch of science and art, as well as any sort of odd subject useful in life, which has not been utilized for these cheap popular editions; and this can be said too about the classics of all nations. In the Russian high schools for both girls and boys the history of foreign literature forms part of the education, and the pupils of these schools, being guided by the teacher's advice, read excellent translations of the best European literature. But, thanks to the very cheap editions, even the poorest pupil of a country primary school can have a correct notion of what Shakespeare, Byron, Goethe, Victor Hugo, and other men of genius have written, always provided that the priest is not the schoolmaster of the village.

Students' books and school books are also very cheap in Russia, as compared with the prices in this country. Sometimes I am asked to recommend a good text-book on botany, biology, or chemistry, and I hesitate about recommending Mendelfieff's book, which costs here a guinea, or an equally good book on botany, by an English author, which costs as much. In Russia, Mendelfieff's Chemistry, in two volumes, was published twenty-five years ago at the price of twelve shillings, and now it is still cheaper. It is the same with all students' books in Russia; they are from one-half to a third of the price at which they are sold in England.

The English reader will probably say to this, "No wonder! Your writers and translators are poorly paid, and altogether work is so much cheaper in Russia than it is in England"; but this would not be quite true. As far as the printers are concerned, the money wages in the printing trade are lower in Russia than they are here—at least in London and the great cities—although the difference becomes much smaller if we take the wages paid in the country towns of England. Printing, as a rule, is slightly cheaper in Russia, and therefore some English publishers have now part of their artistic printing done at St. Petersburg. But it must not be forgotten either that the machinery which is used by the large printing houses at St.

well printed, crowd the Continental book market. The result is that such books not only satisfy the need of the reader who is looking out for them, but they also attract those who otherwise would not have thought of buying books and of starting a little library of their own. Perhaps the greatest successes in this direction have been attained in Russia. Cheap editions of good books, both by Russian authors and as translations, began to come out in that country about forty-five years ago; and I must say that this excellent tendency was due to a great extent to the *Russian* women. At present Russian classics are circulating in numbers of cheap editions. The whole of Poushkin's prose and verse costs only three shillings in a quite decent ten-volume edition, while his separate poems and stories can be obtained at all prices beginning at one farthing. The same is true of the works of another great poet, Lermontoff. Some of these popular editions are illustrated by first-rate artists. As early as 1858, a large publishing firm, Kozhantchikoff's, began to publish at low prices very good editions of the works of the various modern authors, such as the historian Kostomaroff, the dramatist Ostróvsky, the novelist Gont-baróff, and some other well-known writers. It may be added that on all these books the firm made profits, and prospered, until they undertook to publish cheap editions of nonconformist <nufco/nifc) literature; whereupon the terrible censorship ruined the firm by seizing most of their editions. Kozhantchikoff's ambition was to create readers of national history by giving them Kostomaroff's *Monographs* in a cheap and nicely published edition, and in this he succeeded wonderfully: from that time Kostomftroff has been widely read in Russia. The bulky history of Solovióff, a rather dry work, originally in twenty-seven volumes, has also been republished lately in a marvellously cheap edition in eight volumes. As to the "critics," both dead and living—Byelinsky, Dobroluboff, Pissareff, Mikhailovsky—sufficient to say that every volume of these splendid writers, containing a matter of more than 420 pages, can be had for the modest price of two shillings!

And of Byelinsky, for whose works the copyright has expired, there are two editions, of which the volume, same size, costs only one shilling.

Other publishers have made it their ambition to circulate cheap books of science. The Russian student can have, therefore, for a surprisingly small sum, the gems of the most recent works of all countries upon his bookshelf. Long ago he had a collection of the chief works of Charles Darwin for nine shillings. Just now a still cheaper edition has been brought out; and to judge of the value of the translation, made anew from the latest edition, it is sufficient to say that the best professors have done the work. Many years ago Buckle's *History of Civilisation* was published at three shillings, and an abridged edition at one shilling, of which more than 15,000 copies were circulated. Flammarion's *Astronomy*, with 382 illustrations and three chromo-lithographs, costs only six shillings. That splendid monumental work by Elisee Reclus, his *Universal Geography*, which reads like a first-rate romance but is at the same time a great scientific work, was published in Russia as the volumes were coming out in France, at an incomparably lower price than in England, and it is now being republished in five- and six-shilling volumes. This is, of course, a work that every cultured household ought to possess, but the price of the English edition makes it inaccessible in this country. The same can be said about the chief historical works, (Schlosser, Gervinus, &c.), which, with but a few exceptions, are little known in England, while they are quite familiar in Russia.

The sad conditions of a severe censorship in Russia have ruined many publishers, and hinder a good many original works from seeing the light. Publishing firms have therefore to rely a good deal upon translations, and it is really wonderful to see the number of good books, well translated and well published at an extremely modest price, that circulate in Russia. The absence of literary treaties, which permits books to be translated free into Russian, certainly cannot explain this fact, because

and to buy his works alone would cost twice as much as the yearly subscription to the weekly paper. In short, in the course of the year, the subscriber will receive more than nine thousand printed pages of good reading, besides a thousand pages of the illustrated weekly itself.

It may, of course, be asked, How is it possible to give all that printed matter for thirteen shillings? But the secret is in the enormous circulation of the paper, which has had nearly 200,000 subscribers ever since it gave, one year, the works of Turgu6neff as a supplement, and in the fact that the subscription is paid in advance. It must also be added! that the authors of the works given as a supplement are well paid, I am told, and the publisher of the weekly does not reserve exclusive rights on the works of these authors. All taken, this system seems to have given such excellent results that there are now quite a number of weeklies which give similarly rich supplements. Some weeklies devoted to education achieve wonders in this line.

One more example of cheap publications is the series entitled *The Library of the Primary School*. It is a series of novels, geographical descriptions, historical and natural history reading, and so on, mostly suited for young people who have only received or are receiving primary education. The books are small and nicely illustrated, and so arranged that the subscribers receive them as they would receive a monthly magazine, but in batches of from two to five books at a time. This enables several families in a village to club together for one subscription, and they receive each month about three hundred pages of printed matter for sixpence. The books are really very pretty, with an elegantly illustrated cover, and contain no advertisements excepting one on the back of the cover, to notify that all these publications will be sent to subscribers in any part of the Empire for six shillings yearly, or three shillings the half-year, paid in advance.

found in France or in England themselves. It may seem paradoxical to say so, but the rich mines of information contained in British Blue-books are nearly always better known in Russia, through our reviews, than in England. Some of the reviews have lately introduced the system of publishing the works of their contributors in book form, charging the author with the bare cost of printing, and giving him all the advantages of advertisement by the review. An extremely interesting book on English politics and social life was thus published a few months ago by the *Russkoye Bogatstvo* at the remarkably low price of three shillings for a large octavo book of 560 pages, with the result that three thousand copies of the book were sold immediately. The author was well remunerated for his work, and the review has had the best of advertisements.

But where the Russian publishers excel is in the supplements which they give with the illustrated weekly papers. There is one publisher who is especially noted for that. He publishes a weekly illustrated paper, something like the German *Gartenlaube*, for which the annual subscription is six roubles and fifty kopeks, or thirteen shillings, which can be paid, if required, in three or four instalments. For this modest sum the subscriber receives not only the weekly illustrated, of which each number consists of twenty quarto pages, and a monthly fashion-book with all sorts of dress and fancy needlework patterns, but also a monthly magazine of about two hundred pages in each number, in which there are novels, poems, and popular science articles; and in addition to all that the publisher gives the complete works of some popular writer, like Turgueneff, Gogol, Gontcharoff, or Ostrevsky. This year, for instance, the subscribers receive in instalments the complete works of Tchekhoff in sixteen small octavo volumes of 200 pages each, and twentyfour volumes of another less popular novelist, Lyesk6ff. This latter, although not a writer of the first order, is still worth having in a library. As to Tchekhoff, he is, after Tolstoy, one of our best living writers,

nowhere are the author's rights costly upon translations of serious books, nor is the remuneration which is paid to the translators in Russia lower than it is here. It is simply the taste for reading the best works of all European literature which has been developed in the country, to a great extent, by the cheap editions, and is maintained by the reviews. The result is that there is certainly a great deal of truth in the saying which we often hear, namely, that the Russian reader knows the literature and science of other countries better than the readers of those countries themselves.

Another important feature of the Russian publishing activity is the attention that has been given to the country laborer, the peasant. Some publishers, inspired with the desire of spreading knowledge among the peasant masses, as well as several others who are merely guided by commercial calculations, publish a mass of excellent literature and popular science in editions of hundreds of thousands of copies, on good paper, well printed, the books ranging from one to thirty kopeks (*i. e.* from one farthing to sevenpence) in price. So that for a few shillings a poor family living in the country can have a shelf of books upon various subjects, corresponding to a popular encyclopaedia, and another shelf of lighter reading for the same price. There are, of course, both at Moscow and at St. Petersburg, a number of very unscrupulous publishers who send to the villages the most objectionable publications—partly reproductions of the oldest absurd romances, and partly of the modern music-hall type. Tons of that sort of literature and cheap pictures are hurled down upon the country, and are spread there by special pedlars, who go from village to village with their loads of farthing

books and pictures. But a considerable improvement has taken place lately in that sort of literature, owing to the efforts partly of the women pioneers of primary education, who have started cheap editions of better literature, and partly of Tolstoy and his friends (the firm "The Intermediary"). This last firm

alone spreads every year i ,•..., 1,000,000, to 2,000,000 copies of very well chosen popular literature; so that. at the present moment there is a large literature of good popular publications,, which would do honor to any West European country. One finds now among:, these farthing and half-penny publications all sorts of admirable abridgements of the works of the best writers of all nations—in natural science, economics, geography, agriculture, hygiene, folklore, fiction, poetry, calendars full of reliable encyclopaedic information and yet costing only five farthings, and so on. Only history is poorly represented, on account of the rigors of censorship. In short, looking through the catalogues of different publishing firms, it is impossible not to feel gratitude to those publishers who bring out such a mass of cheap good books in all branches of knowledge, and give every facility for the purchase of them, by the country readers.

Great attention is also given to the children's literature. The thinking Russian attaches the highest importance to the educational question; and. both educators and publishers do their best to supply youthful readers with, good books at the lowest possible price.

I can well remember Paul Bert's delightful little books coming out in Russia as soon as they appeared in France; books that lead a child in a most fascinating way through the whole range of natural science—physics, chemistry, geology, and biology. Some of these books have from 150 to 400 engravings, and they are sold at prices varying from fourpence to tenpence. And L ee e now that scores of similar' books of popular science for the youth have been lately translated from all European languages. Quite a number of men and women in Russia make their living by such translations, or by compiling or adapting more serious works—even the most profound philosophical ones—for the young. Kant's Philosophy, for instance, is summed up very simply and published at ninepence. As to the European classics, they circulate in Russia us widely as the Russian classics, and separate poems, plays, and novels can be

had at all prices, beginning with one farthing. Of course, there are plenty of expensive editions as well, but these too are much below the English prices. The Russian monthly review also deserves to be mentioned. It is of the same educational character as the English *Quarterly Review* and the *Westminster Review* used to be in years past, it is generally a large octavo book of from four to five hundred closely printed pages, and the reader finds there for his two shillings or half a-crown a great variety of most valuable information. There is always one novel or two by some of the best Russian writers—all novels of Turgeneff and Tolstoy having appeared first in some review. Besides the original works, there is usually a novel translated from some European language, running serially. Then comes a succession of serious articles on all manner of subjects, but chiefly philosophical, historical, and economical—the size of the review permitting it to take in elaborate articles of from thirty to forty pages. After these comes the most important portion of every Russian review, the literary criticism, in which the critic, *A pro- pos* of a new novel or drama, discusses at some length and in an attractive style all sorts of matters pertaining to social and domestic life. The greatest educators of intellectual Russia have always been her art critics—Byelinsky, Dobroluboff Plssareff, Mikhailovsky, and so on—each of them a philosopher and an artist himself. Finally, each review contains a detailed survey of political, social, and literary life at home and abroad. Notwithstanding all obstacles offered by censorship, the “Review of Inner Life,” which was always conducted in the best periodicals by first-rate writers, has been for the last forty years an inexhaustible mine of information about all vital questions in the country. As to the “Foreign Review,” the letters from Paris (once written by Elie Reclus) or the letters from England, which have now run from month to month for some years already in a certain review, reminding one of the well-known London letters of Louis Blanc—these letters give to the Russians a knowledge of life, as it is in these two countries, such as is seldom