

The Tsar is Dead! Long Live the Tsar's Collection!

ABSTRACT

The Russian Imperial Collection is a 2,600-volume book collection at the Library of Congress. The Law Library received approximately 1,300 volumes regarding military laws, the abolition of serfdom, revisions of civil and criminal laws, volumes on special legal subjects, and personal volumes belonging to the tsars and their immediate family members. The collection is comprised of books from the libraries of Tsars Alexander II, Alexander III, and Nicholas II who ruled Russian from the mid nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries.

The collection consists almost entirely of books bound either in full or quarter leather. The leather is varied in its type — sheep, goat, calf, pig — though it is consistent in its lack of quality. The conservation treatment of the books in the Russian Imperial Collection provides an opportunity to examine how best to achieve single-item treatment in a collections care context. The rarity, variety, and vulnerability of the books in the collection demand an understanding of book history, binding structures, and binding material. The sheer size of the collection requires an approach that maximizes productivity and reproducible quality. At the Library of Congress, the number of books in need of repair also necessitates consideration of the division of labor between conservator and technicians.

A survey conducted by the Conservation Division of the Library of Congress determined the type and extent of damage to volumes in the collection. This paper outlines the findings of the survey, discusses the treatment decisions based on the survey, and elaborates on the decision-making process and its successes and failures.

The Russian Imperial Collection, previously known as the Winter Palace Collection and the Tsar's Library, is a 2,600-volume book collection at the Library of Congress. Portions of the collection have been divided among the Rare Book and Special Collections Division, the Music Division, and the Law Library. The Law Library received approximately 1,300 volumes regarding military laws, the abolition of serfdom, and revisions of civil and criminal laws; volumes on special legal subjects; and personal volumes belonging to the tsars and their immediate family members. The collection is comprised of books from the libraries of the Romanov Tsars Alexander II (1818-1881), his son Alexander III (1845-1894), and his grandson Nicholas II (1868-1918), who consecutively ruled Russia from the mid nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries.

The Law Library collection, purchased by the Library of Congress in the 1920s and 1930s from the Soviet state, contains a range of volumes printed in the eighteenth century to the end of the Romanov Dynasty in 1917. The Romanov Dynasty dates from the early seventeenth century, as does their penchant for book collecting. A number of libraries throughout the country housed various royal collections. By 1914 the personal libraries of Nicholas II numbered over sixty-nine thousand titles. The number and variety of imperial bookplates attest to the personal aspect of the collection. Bookplates found in the collection include those belonging to Grand Duke Alexander Nikolayevich (later Alexander II), Great Duchess Olga Alexandrovna (Alexander III's daughter), Nicholas II, and Grand Duke Vladimir Alexandrovich (Alexander II's son).

The bindings in the collection are decorative; the majority are in full leather. Many volumes have gilt edges and are gold tooled. Some volumes are covered in silk and velvet. Several of the volumes are printed and titled in foreign languages such as German, French, and English. It is apparent that much time, money, and care went into binding what is, in the end, a prosaic selection of texts. Unfortunately, the period of construction for many of the bindings, the mid to late nineteenth century, is not a good

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one for binding materials and practices. Many volumes in the collection have broken inner and outer joints, broken endcaps, and/or missing spines. The leather has deteriorated considerably on many volumes.

The Conservation Division of the Library of Congress surveyed the 1,300 volumes in the law collection. The survey was conducted after consultation with the Law Library curators, who deemed the care and housing of this collection to be of high priority. The survey led the Conservation Division to break down the repairs needed for the collection into several categories: endcap repair, joint and endleaf repair, spine repair, pamphlet binding, and major treatment. Prior to and during the repair work on the collection, a group of technicians housed all of the volumes in custom-fitted corrugated board clamshell boxes. My colleague Dan Paterson oversaw the rehousing project. The repaired, boxed volumes are stored in locked shelving at the Library of Congress.

Approximately four hundred fifty of the 1,300 volumes were in need of at least one of the defined treatment categories. Due to the disparate quality and types of bindings represented in the collection, a holistic approach to the repair of the volumes in the collection made the most sense: this approach allowed for the historic cohesiveness of the collection to become evident. This approach would drive many of the treatment decisions throughout the project.

The aim of the project was to provide individual care to each rare volume, but to do so in the most efficient way possible given the size and character of the collection. Four staff technicians and I did the repair of the volumes, except for major treatments, which required a different treatment protocol. The technicians are proficient in a number of conservation repair and rehousing techniques and they work on a number of projects utilizing multiple conservation skills. Their work schedules are divided into two shifts per day so they can, and have, worked on ten different projects per week. The repair of most of the Russian Imperial Collection lasted for approximately ten months with the technicians working between two and three shifts per week. Work on the major treatment category continues today.

The repair of this collection posed a number of aesthetic challenges. Several of the endsheets were bright green and pink and, frankly, hideous, but in need of sympathetic repair nevertheless. In addition to green (in various bright shades) and pink (also in various bright shades) paper and silk moiré, there were yellow, blue, marbled, and plain brown endsheets. It became apparent that groups of books were bound as cohesive units and that repair of individual volumes would sometimes need to coalesce into a larger grouping of bindings. Toned Japanese paper hinge repairs were used for the majority of the volumes. In addition, many of the Japanese paper hinge repairs used a modified

version of Elaine Schlefer's pleated paper hinge repair as detailed in the *Guild of Book Workers Journal* and reprinted in the *Book and Paper Group Annual 20* (2001).

Initially, I toned several sheets of Japanese paper to match the pinks and the blues and the greens. This provided a cache of colors so the project could begin directly with repair technique. Once the technique was taught and successfully applied by the technicians, and the original supply of toned paper was used, the technicians toned tissue for the remainder of the volumes to be repaired. The repair could have been completed with untoned Japanese paper, or a generally acceptable color, but it was decided to match as closely as possible the original color. This decision goes back to the idea of treating the individual items with an eye toward the look of the collection as a whole. Preserving the original aesthetic quality of the collection and its usability was of paramount concern.

This brings to mind several advantages, both for conservator and technician, to working with a large collection with a variety of repair types. Primarily, the experience provides an effective training and research vehicle. Within each category of repair there are individual volumes with specific problems: things like thick boards versus thin boards; wide joint repairs versus narrow; slightly detached boards at the head or tail only versus completely detached boards. Each variation requires a different approach and emphasis, but its repair aims to achieve the same goal — a structurally sound bound book. The large number of volumes necessarily creates a long period for repair that in turn allows for evaluation of repair styles and techniques and refinement and improvement of technique.

The improvement of technique is particularly important for book repair where aesthetic demands of repair meet the physical reality of the book form. It is of the utmost importance that at the end of a repair the volume is usable — that the volume can be opened and reopened and opened yet again. This point is of particular interest to curatorial staff at the Library of Congress. They serve the volumes to patrons and see the success or failure of repairs. To illustrate this point, I have recently been contacted twice by the Law Library to inform me that researchers have requested volumes from the collection. The efficacy of the repairs will be apparent to curators and researchers alike. The larger question posed during this conference of use and conservation is at the heart of many book conservation decisions. In many instances simply rehousing an entire collection constitutes enough work in stabilizing a collection, but it is not enough if a book collection is to be used for what it was intended: as an object to be paged and handled and read.

The general workflow of the project moved from endsheet/inner joint repair to endcap repair to spine repair. This allowed for the development of some book-specific skills, both mental and physical, for the technicians (and

myself) and prepared the technicians for spine repair, which was often a combination of joint, endcap, and spine repair with a little toning thrown in for good measure. The repairs as outlined in the survey were not absolute. The categories often placed a book in its most obvious, but not its only, repair category.

In the end, the distinction between a spine repair treatment and a major treatment was that the latter was reserved for leather rebacking. As the project progressed and treatment technique became increasingly nuanced, the number of spine repair treatments increased at the expense of volumes originally placed in the major treatment category. An example is a volume that had its endcap repaired with toned Japanese paper adhered over ten-point cardstock. The repaired end cap is one part of the repair. Since the spine was detached on one side and mostly detached on the other, toned Japanese paper hinges were adhered to the boards and over the spine to create a new flexible hinge. The toned Japanese paper was treated with a light coating of SC6000.

The repair technique that allowed for an increase in spine repair versus major treatment was Don Etherington's Japanese paper hinge repair. Though this repair was used on several volumes and is versatile, it does have specified limitations. The repair is best suited for books with tight spines that are no larger than ten inches in height and one and a half inches in thickness. In the context of this project, however, it is just those kinds of limitations that provide the opportunity to develop new solutions for volumes that do not fit into defined categories like the previously discussed volume.

Repair on this scale with a variety of people is conducive to interaction, cooperation, and rapport. Since I have been discussing trying to mimic the original aesthetic of the volumes in the collection, the question may arise as to why it was decided to move toward more spine repair with Japanese tissue and away from working with leather. The answer is that pragmatism is also a necessary component to projects of this scale. The technicians were greater in number than conservators and they possessed the skill to carry out the Japanese tissue repairs. Though much thought was given to extensively training technicians in leather repair, it was ultimately deemed too time-consuming to do so. The focus of the project would have changed from repair to training.

Volumes that fell into the major treatment category often had missing spines and broken joints and were bound in leather. The leather rebacks required the most skill, but were not the most problematic, a distinction that belongs to the spine repair category. Spine repair, with its myriad repair possibilities, was also the most useful learning tool. It required taking disparate constructions to create a usable, functioning, structurally sound book. The leather reback volumes were rather straightforward: they diag-

nosed much more easily than the volumes in the spine repair category. For example, consider a book where the original false bands were on the original spine liner. To carry out the repair, old leather was lifted and new leather toned and pared and adhered onto the volume in the traditional manner. After rebacking, the volume could go back to a technician for joint repair and color matching as in the case of most minor repair category volumes, decreasing the total work time needed per person per volume.

The idea of streamlining workflow procedures was incorporated into the major treatment category as well. After examining many of the volumes, and due to the fact that many of the volumes to be rebacked were uniform in nature — large, green, and with the same damage — a rebacking protocol was established between me and my colleague Dan Paterson, who was also doing leather rebacks for this collection. Based on the physical evidence presented by the collection, all (or almost all) of the rebacked volumes were fitted with a Dove Grey paper hollow tube, given alum-tawed pigskin false bands, and covered with toned Hewit calfskin. The calfskin was ordered in a bright green, but was toned to the shade of green particular to each volume. Approximately one hundred fifty volumes in the collection form a series bound in green leather. Although the original spines were quite thoroughly decorated, the rebacked volumes were not. In particular, retitling was out of the question because of the original Cyrillic lettering.

Christopher Clarkson's board slotting technique was used on one volume with the intention of developing it for a number of volumes. I would like to thank John Bertonaschi for setting up the Emco drilling and milling machine for this process. Instead of lifting the leather on boards, as in the traditional leather reback and which is fraught with peril, this repair mills through the board at an angle below the leather, thus rendering lifting the leather unnecessary. Once the repair is in place it is extremely strong and durable. It is a great repair, but it requires volumes with specific problems and is difficult to efficiently incorporate into a group of volumes with disparate repair needs. It was a useful experiment, but one ultimately incompatible with the vast repair needs of this collection.

During this project I came across a book that was not in need of repair, but it struck me as meaningful to the approach taken to the repair of this collection. It is a volume of children's tales, in English, and someone has inscribed "For the Children, Peterhof, June 1904." Peterhof was one of the tsar's libraries, June 1904 was during the reign of Nicholas II, and the children, given the context of this collection, can reasonably be assumed to be his children. The entire family was killed in 1918. By the late 1920s and '30s the Soviet state was divesting itself of its

tsarist patrimony for the one thing most indispensable to revolutions of all stripes: cash. Since the collapse of the Soviet empire, the Russian Orthodox Church now considers Nicholas II and his family religious martyrs. By treating the Russian Imperial Collection as a whole, rather than as an accumulation of sometimes odd, individually bound volumes, the character of a single volume imbues the rest of the collection with meaning. Thus, this one volume tells a part of the story of the entire collection. It is through treating collections with the care and depth we give to individual items that we can accurately perpetuate those stories.

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