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CRITICAL FORUM: ENCODING THE STATE—ON THE BUREAUCRATIC GRAPHOSPHERE

Handwriting and Bureaucracy

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Abstract

Although Peter I's reform of the Russian alphabet has long been studied by historians, the fact that it was a reform of print but not of handwriting has rarely been addressed. Handwriting in the eighteenth century remained messy and hard to read, only changing into a modern bureaucratic script around the turn of the nineteenth century. This article examines two factors that led to this delayed moment of change: the technology of engraved *propisi* and their incorporation into primary education. It also thinks about why this change that is apparent to every historian who works with archival documents from both centuries has been so little recognized in scholarship.

When Simon Franklin's *The Russian Graphosphere* came out, I looked to it in hopes of answering a question I have long had: Why did bureaucratic handwriting change dramatically between the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth? Plenty has been written about an earlier moment of sudden, dramatic change in the world of Russian letters: the Petrine reform of the Cyrillic alphabet. Or, rather, plenty has been written about what was not precisely a reform but more a qualified modification, as Franklin describes it: "there was no change to the existing Cyrillic alphabet in its traditional spheres of use. Instead, Peter introduced a modified version for a specific context, for non-ecclesiastical printing."[1] Peter himself took part in the reform (for so we still mostly call it), weighing in on which letters to eliminate (such as ot and psi) and how the new typeface should look (more rounded and closer to Latin script). "With these letters print historical and manufacturing books," he wrote, "but those which are crossed out should not be used in such books."[2] This was important in that it emphasized the fact that the "new" Russian alphabet was above all a secular one. As Viktor Zhivov has put it, "Peter's reform of the alphabet reflected all of the basic aspects of Petrine linguistic policy, signifying as it did the graphic opposition between secular and religious culture."[3]

The problem when it comes to thinking about changes in handwriting, however, is the fact that Peter's reform was a reform primarily of printing—the new alphabet was a new typeface above all. That means that although secular *printing* changed immediately in ways that made it entirely legible to a reader of modern Russian, secular *handwriting* did

[1] Simon Franklin, *The Russian Graphosphere, 1450–1850* (Cambridge, UK, 2019), 105.

[2] N. Grigorovich, *Azbuka s ispravleniiami imperatora Petra Velikogo i ukazom ego o vvedenii v upotreblenie grazhdanskogo shrifta* (St. Petersburg, 1877), 10.

[3] V.M. Zhivov, *Language and Culture in Eighteenth Century Russia*, trans. Marcus Levitt (Boston, 2009), 412.

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not. Instead, anyone who has spent time with both eighteenth- and nineteenth-century archival documents knows that familiarity with nineteenth-century bureaucratic handwriting leaves one totally unprepared for its eighteenth-century equivalent. Instead, it is essentially a continuation of the earlier *skoropis′*, "literally 'speed-writing,' cursive," which "developed an ever-widening range of local, temporal and individual characteristics," as Franklin put it.[4] Skoropis′ was the writing of bureaucracy, but as Franklin's description suggests, it was hardly a standardized bureaucratic writing. Some paleographers describe it even more vividly, as "distinguished by an extraordinary *kriuchkovatost′* [squiggly-ness] and tossing several letters up above the line" to the point that skoropis′ from the seventeenth century "is read with great difficulty and demands significant skill."[5] The same is true for much eighteenth-century handwriting, a few outliers notwithstanding. So, my question is really two questions: first, why did it not change along with the Petrine reform of print, and second, why did it then change rapidly at the end of the century?

There turn out to be two major answers to my second question, at least. The first involves technological change. Peter's reform of the civil alphabet is easily understood in terms of technology, both in the technology of printing and typefaces and in the broader aims of the reform (the manufacturing books that were to be printed using the new script). It was part of Peter's revision of state function, which involved not only major changes like the establishment of new state institutions but also major changes in administrative practices involving paper. During his reign, for example, petitions and other administrative documents were to be written on sheets of paper and archived in books, not glued end to end and rolled into scrolls, as had been prior practice.[6] The goal was to make administrative records more physically accessible.

Given that emphasis on accessibility, it is in some ways surprising that handwriting stayed as messy as it did through the rest of the eighteenth century. It stayed messy, however, and did not change significantly until another technological change at the end of the century: the appearance of engraved, printed *propisi*—penmanship guides—starting in the 1770s. These printed guides provided engraved images of how cursive script ought to look: gently slanted, evenly sized, and smoothly connected. Pavel Berkov linked their appearance to the development of italic lettering in engraved books and italic typeface earlier in the century, which regularized reading slanted letters as well as upright ones.[7] The simplest of these guides were only a few pages long, filled with examples of each letter in the civil alphabet as they ought to appear in handwriting (usually with several elaborate versions of capital letters, too), along with lines of text that demonstrated how the letters might be joined.[8] More complicated ones also included engravings depicting how properly to cut a pen nib or how to sit at a writing table and hold one's pen, even written instructions for

[4] Franklin, *Russian Graphosphere*, 104.

[5] *Paleografiia* (St. Petersburg, 1910), 21; other comments on the difficulty of reading seventeenth- and eighteenth-century skoropis′ include E.F. Karskii, *Ocherk slavianskoi kirillovskoi paleografii* (Warsaw, 1899), 175–76; A.I. Sobolevskii, *Slaviano-russkaia paleografiia*, 4th ed. (Moscow, 2005), 42–43.

[6] Franklin, *Russian Graphosphere*, 33; see also Alison K. Smith, "'To Each Their Grievance Is Bitter and Unbearable': Petitions, Autocracy, and the Rule of Law in Eighteenth-Century Russia," *Law and History Review* 43, no. 4 (2025): 717–38, for other examples of legislation intended to improve the legibility of paperwork.

[7] P.N. Berkov, "O perekhode skoropisi XVIII v. v sovremennoe russkoe pis′mo," in N.E. Nosov, ed., *Issledovaniia po otechestvennomu istochnikovedeniiu. Sbornik statei, posviashchennykh 75-letiiu professora S.N. Valka* [*Trudy LOII SSSR* 7] (Moscow, 1964), 40–45.

[8] *Azbuka dlia Rossiiskogo chistopisaniia* (1788); *Azbuka skoropisnaia, dlia maloletnikh detei* (1797). Many also included Arabic numerals as well as a multiplication table and examples of addition and subtraction.

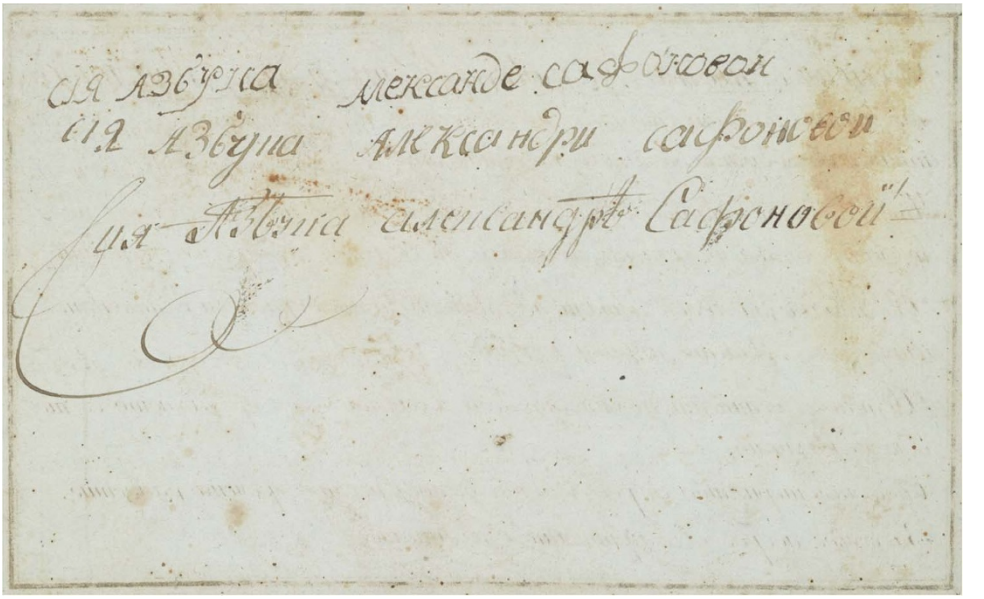


Figure 1. Three versions of the name Aleksandra Safonova, written on the back of a page of A. Reshetnikov, *Rossiiskie propisi, sluzhashchie dlia naucheniia detei pravil′nomu i osnovatel′nomu chistopisaniiu* (Moscow, 1787), from the Yudin collection, Library of Congress.

making ink.[9] Propisi also began to break down the elements of letters (lines and rounded shapes) or show how to mark a page to practice writing at an even, exact angle.[10]

These publications exploded after their initial appearance in the 1770s. One bibliography found more than fifty exemplars of handwriting guides published from the 1770s through 1810, some of them in huge print runs (more than 60,000 copies of a 1782 *Guide to Penmanship for Youth in Grammar Schools of the Russian Empire*, including reprints, for example).[11] Relatively few survive, however, likely because they were so well used. Some surviving examples feature doodles or practice words (as in Figure 1). A late-eighteenth-century guide for primary school teachers even suggested that teachers might want to "glue printed propisi on thick paper; for in such condition they may last longer and not grow ragged so quickly."[12]

These propisi promised legibility, true, but also something else: beauty. One early propis′ that appeared in several editions with slightly altered engravings declared it "showed the beauty of Russian writing." Its title page included four images of finely dressed women holding books and pens, resting on cartouches with lines extolling the power of the pen to

[9] Aleksandr Rykov, *Rukovodstvo, vedushchee k udobnomu izucheniiu Rossiiskogo chistopisaniia* (St. Petersburg, 1782); A. Reshetnikov, *Rossiiskie propisi, sluzhashchie dlia naucheniia detei pravil′nomu i osnovatel′nomu chistopisaniiu* (Moscow, 1787); *Propis′ pokazyvaiushchaia krasotu Rossiiskogo pis′ma* (Moscow, 1796); Ivan Rozonov, engraver, *Azbuka rossiiskogo chistopisaniia raspolozhennaia na frantsuzskoi maner* (Moscow, 1788).

[10] A. Reshetnikov, *Novaia rossiiskaia azbuka dlia obucheniia detei chteniiu, s prisovokupleniem propisei rukovodstvuiushchaia k chistomu rossiiskomu pis′mu, soderzhashchaia v sebe primernye pis′ma mnogiia nravouchitel′nye pravila, kratkuiu grammatiku i basni s kartinkami* (Moscow, 1801); [V.] Volinskii, *Rossiiskie propisi* (Riga, 1810); V. Pletnev, *Kalligrafiia i sposob nauchit′sa pisat′ krasivo po pravilam luchshikh kalligrafov* (Moscow, 1811).

[11] S.A. Reiser, *Russkaia paleografiia novogo vremeni. Neografiia* (Moscow, 1982), 83–84.

[12] *Rukovodstvo uchiteliam pervogo i vtorogo klassa narodnykh uchilishch Rossiiskoi imperii, izdannoe po vysochashemu poveleniiu tsarstvuiushchei imperatritsy Ekateriny vtoryia* (St. Petersburg, 1783), 61.

elevate the mind through literature.[13] (These elegant ladies were clearly sometimes models for real women or girls; the handwriting in Figure 1 belongs to an Aleksandra Safonova, for example. For all that women were engaged writers, their experiences of learning penmanship do not show up much in the discussion of education and bureaucracy that follows for lack of specific attention in the sources.[14]) Although guides above all tried to standardize lower-case letters, they also often gave elaborate examples of upper-case letters to be used as decoration. The author N. Stankevich went further, writing of his desire to "teach the real beauty of penmanship." Not everyone publishing handwriting guides was up to this challenge, he claimed, and therefore he felt compelled to produce not only propisi but also his own "theory of penmanship." His goal, he stated, was in part to combat the "numerous propisi which have been cut from letters by a bad hand, and which not only do not teach the real beauty of penmanship but even incline away from it."[15]

The second major influence on the handwriting transition was education. Zhivov notes that the civil script was slow to spread because even reading the civil script (as opposed to the ecclesiastical script), let alone writing it, only became a regular part of primary education toward the end of the eighteenth century, and so "there were apparently no appreciable results until the early nineteenth century."[16] At the end of the eighteenth century, however, not only reading but also writing became more of a focus in schools, ranging from those that aimed to train future bureaucrats to more general ones. The 1786 statute outlining education in *narodnye uchilishcha* (public schools) noted that starting in the second half of the first year of schooling, students should be taught "to write from propisi."[17] In 1797, the curriculum for a new school that aimed to educate "noble-born *chinovniki* for civil service" specifically emphasized the need for instruction in penmanship for such pupils: "12-year-old noble children already have basic knowledge of Russian literacy and therefore neither teaching it nor alphabet books are necessary; but Russian penmanship (*chistopisanie*) is necessary for civil service, and for that reason it should be taught."[18] Penmanship was listed as a subject to be taught at, and propisi were listed as necessary purchases for, commercial schools, schools affiliated with universities, and lycées.[19] Even private schools taught penmanship. In 1803 a teacher named Aleksandr Sebek advertised his private school for children (no older than eight or ten) in the newspaper *Sanktpeterburgskie vedomosti*, and listed penmanship among the skills he would teach both boys and girls.[20]

In addition, education was explicitly linked to the production of propisi. In 1820, the charter for schools affiliated with the university at Dorpat (present-day Tartu) made this clear. District (*uezd*) schools ought to teach the subject: "Penmanship is taught in every class, three hours a week in German, Russian, and sometimes Latin or French, using engraved propisi. The teacher should oversee that students write accurately, but without extraneous decoration. The most important thing is that they have legible, diverse, firm, and as

[13] *Propis' pokazyvaiushchaia krasotu Rossiiskogo pis'ma* (Moscow, 1802).

[14] On women as correspondents and their use of language, see Michelle Lamarche Marrese, "'The Poetics of Everyday Behavior' Revisited: Lotman, Gender, and the Evolution of Russian Noble Identity," *Kritika* 11, no. 4 (2010): 701–39.

[15] N. Stankevich, *Teoriia chistopisaniia* (St. Petersburg, 1808), unpaginated forward.

[16] Zhivov, *Language and Culture*, 413.

[17] *Polnoe sobranie zakonov Rossiiskoi imperii. Pervoe sobranie,* 45 vols. (St. Petersburg, 1830), 22:16,241 (August 5, 1786) (hereafter cited as *PSZ*).

[18] *PSZ*, 24:17,733 (January 14, 1797).

[19] *PSZ*, 28:21,207 (March 12, 1804); 28:21,266 (April 16, 1804); 28:21,501 (November 5, 1804); 29: 22,262 (September 1, 1806); 31:24,325 (August 12, 1810); 32:25,509 (1813).

[20] *Sanktpeterburgskie vedomosti*, December 29, 1803, 3288.

much as possible, good handwriting."[21] This charter also wrote of the place of penmanship in education even at fairly advanced levels: "In the lower classes of the Gymnasia the study of penmanship is absolutely necessary. Every week it is taught in the fifth class for three hours, and in the fourth for two hours. The goal of this study is legible and clear handwriting without any decoration. Aside from German, Latin, and Russian writing, it is possible sometimes to give students Greek, too. Only engraved propisi may be used."[22] The emphasis in this charter on *engraved* guides is important in part because it suggests not only that there were hand-written ones out there, too, but also that those may have been less standardized and less clear. Later statutes also specified the kinds of propisi that could be used; a statute on a new agricultural school noted that they were only to use propisi and texts published by the Ministry of Enlightenment or approved by the Department of Court Lands.[23] In contrast, the form for annual reports of divisional artillery schools suggested that handwritten propisi still had their place. Each report was to include a list of texts used in the classroom. The sample included "for penmanship, propisi, compiled by Lieutenant N. N.," suggesting that individual teachers might produce samples for their students.[24]

The confluence of propisi, particularly engraved ones, and new educational institutions and standards was almost certainly the reason why handwriting changed relatively quickly at the end of the eighteenth century. Furthermore, this change had a clear impact on bureaucratic practice by making it possible to list good handwriting as a prerequisite for state service. As the nineteenth century progressed, statutes emphasized the importance of good handwriting for anyone going into bureaucratic service. For example, the charter for a new school for the children of court servitors laid out how its graduates were to be placed in positions based on their abilities. "Those who have distinguished themselves by particular success, morality, and having good handwriting, [may] enter chancellery service in all offices of the Ministry of the Imperial Court," it noted. However, those "with good success and attestations of laudable behavior, but not having clear handwriting, are accepted into the Highest Court in various servant's positions," while "those particularly distinguished in appearance should be taken straight away as footmen(!)."[25]

All this means that the change at the end of the eighteenth century happened relatively quickly because it was made possible by propisi and educational practices and also met a growing bureaucratic demand. My first question—why did this change lag so long after Peter's reform of the civil script?—is a bit more difficult to answer, however. Engraved books and organized schools had a history that date back even earlier than his reign, and his establishment of newly regimented colleges could easily have made the same demands for administrative change. The answer may lie in a third question: why has this transition been so little recognized? It was not entirely unrecognized, of course. A few Soviet paleographers began to use the term *neografiia* (neography)—or in one case, *neotografiia*—to think about changes in handwriting after Peter the Great. It was the "paleography of the new era," as one put it, and the transition in handwriting into the nineteenth century was a part of their discussion.[26] But for a century before that, paleographers largely ignored the eighteenth century. Some acknowledged the fact of continuities in handwriting from the seventeenth to the eighteenth century, or included examples of eighteenth-century handwriting in their presentation of examples, but they rarely analyzed changes or thought about why things

[21] *PSZ*, 37:28,303 (June 4, 1820), §79. Primary schools also ought to teach writing using propisi, "with which every primary school should be supplied" (§123).

[22] Ibid., §36.

[23] *Polnoe sobranie zakonov Rossiiskoi imperii. Vtoroe sobranie*, 55 vols. (St. Petersburg, 1830–85), 7:5,363 (May 15, 1832) (hereafter cited as *PSZ*^{II}).

[24] *PSZ*^{II}, 13:10,933 (January 27, 1838).

[25] *PSZ*^{II}, 14:12,052 (February 25, 1839).

[26] Berkov, "O perekhode skoropisi," 37.

persisted.[27] Perhaps the problem is not only messy handwriting but also the very messiness of the eighteenth century, particularly for those nineteenth-century scholars who saw Peter's reign as the most important break from the past. For them, Peter's reign was the last of the "revolutionary" epochs in paleography.[28] Nothing, however, makes the limits of that "revolution" as apparent as the everyday business of the eighteenth-century bureaucracy as preserved in the archives. The limited change in handwriting during the eighteenth century might suggest that Peter's reforms were limited too, an idea that many modern historians would agree with, but which might not have been what earlier nationalist historians wanted to see.

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[27] Karskìi, *Ocherk*.
[28] For example, V. N. Shchepkin, *Uchebnik russkoi paleografii* (Moscow, 1918), 3.