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CRITICAL FORUM: ENCODING THE STATE—ON THE BUREAUCRATIC GRAPHOSPHERE

Encoding Equines: Horses in the Modern Bureaucratic Graphosphere

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Abstract

Focusing on the official certification of horses in imperial and Soviet Russia, this article questions the dependability of the graphosphere as a "technology of authority." While print may have served Russian institutions as "a guarantor of documentary authenticity," the genuineness of the horses themselves proved more elusive. It was harder to produce reliable identity documents for animals than for humans, and even when accurate pedigrees could be tendered in an industry notorious for unscrupulousness, they might still be open to challenge on ideological grounds.

By the 1870s, my chronological point of departure for remarks that will range across the following hundred years, the graphosphere as conceived by Simon Franklin had already coalesced into recognizably modern form. Its dependability as a "technology of authority" nevertheless remained uncertain. The focus here will be on various sorts of certification administered by the military authorities, by the State Horse-breeding Board (*Glavnoe upravlenie gosudarstvennogo konnozavodstva*)—which in imperial Russia fulfilled most of the regulatory responsibilities exercised elsewhere in Europe by autonomous Jockey Clubs—and by the Board's Soviet successor, GuKON (*Glavnoe upravlenie konevodstva i konezavodstva pri Narkomzeme RSFSR*). I shall argue that while print may have served these institutions as "a guarantor of documentary authenticity," the genuineness of the horses themselves proved more elusive. It was harder to produce reliable identity documents for animals than for humans, and even when accurate pedigrees could be tendered in an industry notorious for unscrupulousness, they might still be open to challenge on ideological grounds.[1]

Three vignettes will serve to highlight the unanticipated consequences of state attempts to exploit the authority of the visible written word. The first touches on the social and economic impact of the army's peacetime classification of peasant horses between the 1870s and 1920s. The second considers scandals in the elite horse-racing world at the beginning of the twentieth century, when imported American trotters were given false pedigrees to allow them to compete in harness races reserved for slower native animals. The third discusses Soviet horse exports in the 1960s and 70s, when the market trumped the graphosphere in every respect except one.

[1] Compare Simon Franklin, *The Russian Graphosphere, 1450–1850* (Cambridge, UK, 2019), 226–49, quoted at 235.

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Established in the wake of the 1874 military reform, peacetime equine mobilization commissions sought to fill the gaps between periodic equine censuses, visiting multiple isolated localities to minimize popular resentment of interruptions to horses' work.[2] Prince Tenishev's ethnographic investigation concluded that peasants generally attended willingly because any animal ranked highly by the inspectors automatically rose in value. The equal but opposite relief experienced by owners whose horses were judged unfit for service helped to sustain a festive mood. At Uloma *volost'* in Novgorod province, the presiding artillery officer called forward individuals in turn before completing his blank forms in front of the expectant assembly:

> "Aleksei Simankov, your horse." A voice rings out from the crowd: "Mind your step!" And Simankov, leading his overworked nag on a bridle, drags her with all his strength to the table. "She's never seen a gent in all her born days, your honor, that's why she's shy." Laughter among the public; the gent laughs too. "How old is she?" the officer asks. "Not very, your honor, five years ago she turned ten; she's still a young horse, only she's grown a bit thin." Laughter in the crowd. The officer estimates the horse's height and makes a mark on his list. "What have you put my steed down for, your honor?"—"To cart manure for you," he laughs—"Well, God be thanked," says Simankov. "And I thought you were going to take her away for a general to ride."[3]

Once war and revolution had slashed the equine headcount from 35.8 million in 1916 to 21.1 million in 1922, the mood inevitably soured.[4] By spring 1921, when Lenin abandoned War Communism in favor of the New Economic Policy (NEP), equine shortages had made questions of registration unprecedentedly acute. Collectives around Briansk possessed barely a third of the horses they needed, lacked the credit to buy more, and soon lost thirty of their best animals to the fire service.[5] In Tula and Riazan' provinces, it was the police who commandeered peasant horses, jailing their owners on charges of irregular paperwork.[6] Popularly known as *konskie bilety* (horse tickets) or *konskie pasporty* (horse passports), the Red Army's equine *uchetnye kartochki* (registration cards) revived a deterrent to horse stealing first introduced in Muscovy, and which had most recently been advocated by zemstvo activists to Sergei Witte's commission on agriculture in 1901.[7] In practice, the early Soviet experience confirmed the fears of pre-revolutionary critics who anticipated that equine identity documents, certified by the police or local administration to prevent thieves from making a quick sale, would be open to abuse.[8] Far from stabilizing the market, the value of the coveted white cards issued to animals deemed unfit for military service (superior horses received an undesirable red card) generated what Tracy McDonald has described as "a roaring business in counterfeit tickets and creative scams surrounding the documentation."[9]

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[2] For example, *Voenno-statisticheskoe obozrenie Peterburgskogo Voennogo Okruga. Chast' 2* (St. Petersburg, 1884), 148–60; and Prilozheniia k V-otdelu, no. 5; D.A. Tarasiuk, "Voenno-konskie perepisi kontsa XIX–nachala XX vv.," in V.A. Kuchin, ed., *Istochnikovedenie otechestvennoi istorii, 1989 g.* (Moscow, 1989), 98–132, focuses on procedure.

[3] Kniaz' V. N. Tenishev, *Administrativnoe polozhenie russkogo krest'ianina* (St. Petersburg, 1908), 112–13.

[4] Official figures in Viktor Danilov, *Rural Russia under the New Regime*, trans. Orlando Figes (London, 1988), 268.

[5] *Otchet Brianskogo gubernskogo ekonomicheskogo soveshchaniia (GEKOSO): Na 1-e oktiabria 1921 g.* (Briansk, 1921), 39.

[6] Tracy McDonald, *Face to the Village: The Riazan Countryside under Soviet Rule, 1921–1930* (Toronto, 2011), 69–71.

[7] See, for example, *Trudy mestnykh komitetov o nuzhdakh sel'skokhoziaistvennoi promyshlennosti, vol. 12, Ekaterinoslavskaia guberniia* (St. Petersburg, 1903), 99. On Muscovite horse registration, see Grigorii Karpovich Kotoshikhin, *Russia in the Reign of Aleksei Mikhailovich*, ed. Marshall Poe, trans. Benjamin Phillip Uroff (Warsaw, 2014), 101–2; Vladimir Borisov, *Opisanie goroda Shui i ego okresnostei* (Moscow, 1851), 54–55.

[8] For example, *Zhurnal XXXIV ocherednogo Livenskogo uezdnogo zemskogo sobraniia* (Livny, 1900), 8–9.

[9] McDonald, *Face to the Village*, 228. Color-coded cards had been issued to human conscripts since the nineteenth century.

Such rackets were by no means confined to the lower orders since, as my second vignette shows, pedigree horses depended even more heavily on certification than peasant horses. On purchasing a thoroughbred from a stud farm, nineteenth-century army remount officers demanded a signed and stamped certificate of its origin. Without such credentials, claims made by seller or dealer were to be ignored.[10] Authentication remained crucial at every step of the animal's subsequent military career. When the officers' steeplechases made famous by Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* were established in 1867, entrants required certificates of origin to allow a winner's breeder to receive his share of the prize money.[11] The same motive applied in spades from the 1880s, when mass gambling fueled by the totalizator generated a cash-rich racing industry managed by largely autonomous civilian societies under the aegis of the State Horse-breeding Board. By the end of the century, the Board had approved detailed regulations requiring proof of everything from a racehorse's age to the color of its coat.[12] Most controversial of all in an era dominated by the rivalry between American and Russian trotting horses was the need for evidence of an animal's national origin.[13]

The greatest graphospheric scandals were caused by "ringers": American standardbreds fraudulently represented as Orlov trotters to gain advantage in races restricted to Russian-born entrants distinguished by strength rather than speed. In 1901, the State Board went to elaborate lengths to expose Oslund L., a Minnesota bay sold to Russia through a leading Viennese dealer and subsequently raced as a Russian horse.[14] Following inquiries by the Russian consul in Chicago, the National Trotting Association arranged for the horse's former American trainer to identify him in Moscow: "I knew it was old Oslund the moment I saw him," the trainer wrote to his wife, "and that is all there was to it."[15] While this case was settled out of court, charges against the owner and breeder of a second "ringer" became a national cause-célèbre in September 1903, three years after a gray stallion burst onto the scene under the name of Rassvet (Dawn).[16] Owned by a young Kherson landowner, Aleksandr Shishkin, and bred by the brother of the celebrated stud farmer, Iakov Butovich, Rassvet won 23,000 rubles in his first season and broke the trotting record by a cool two seconds. When these improbable triumphs inevitably prompted speculation that the animal was not what he seemed, suspicion fell on William C. K., another American import via Vienna. In a packed Moscow courtroom, the prosecuting counsel, Nikolai Shubinskii, a leader of the pro-American faction in Russian trotting and subsequently a prominent

[10] V. Anichkov, *Voennoe khoziaistvo: Sravnitel'noe izsledovanie* (St. Petersburg, 1860), 342, referred to regulations from 1852. Breeders' manuscript *attestaty* from the 1830s are reproduced with printed blank *svidetel'stva* from the 1840s and 50s in V.O. Vitt, *Iz istorii russkogo konnozavodstva: Sozdanie novykh porod loshadei na rubezhe XVIII–XIX stoletii* (Moscow, 1952), plates opposite 64, 152, 288, 318, 320, 328. Vitt discussed the question of fraudulent certification only with reference to English importers: ibid., 178–79.

[11] *Polnoe sobranie zakonov Rossiiskoi imperii*, ser. II (St. Petersburg, 1871) vol. 42, pt. 1, no. 44,223 (February 9, 1867), 103. The relevant blank form is printed in ibid., pt. 2, "Shtaty i tabeli," 33.

[12] "Ob utverzhdenii normal'nogo ustava Obshchestv okhotnikov konskogo bega," *Sobranie uzakonenii i rasporiazhenii Pravitel'stva*, June 10, 1899, no. 67, art. 921, 3883–3930, esp. chap. IX, 3913–27.

[13] On aspects of this rivalry, see Olga Petri, "Between Purity and Pragmatism: The Politics of Purebred Breeding and Racing of the Orlov Trotter in Imperial Russia, 1880–1915," *The International Journey of the History of Sport* 40, no. 12 (2023): 1140–60.

[14] "Shrewd Americans Are Caught Racing 'Ringers' on Russian Courses," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, September 24, 1901, 15; "American Ringer in Russia," *Chicago Tribune,* July 8, 1902, 6; amplified in "On a Ringing Expedition," *Anaconda Standard*, July 20, 1902, 12.

[15] "Oslund L. Identified," *The Hartford Courant*, August 28, 1902, 4; "News of Sporting World," *The Detroit Free Press*, September 8, 1902, 8.

[16] Extensive trial reports in *Moskovskii listok*, September 25–30, 1903: "Temnoe delo o 'Razsvete,'" *Peterburgskaia gazeta*, September 25, 1903; "Na begakh," *Peterburgskii listok*, September 26, 1903.

Octobrist, insisted that no Russian horse could run so fast.[17] The defense relied on the future Kadet Vasilii Maklakov, who later recalled the "fanatical adherents and outright liars" on both sides of a case in which the key point of public interest was not the innocence or guilt of the accused, but whether the horse was Russian or American.[18] In the event, no witness was summoned from abroad and the judge dismissed the charges, complaining of contradictory expert evidence. Butovich later claimed that if only his brother had admitted Shishkin's fraud to Count Illarion Vorontsov-Dashkov, the influential president of the St. Petersburg Trotting Society, the case would have been struck out.[19] Instead, it remained long in the memory, fictionalized in 1907 by the writer Aleksandr Kuprin in his "Izumrud" (Emerald), a story told through the horse's mouth in homage to Tolstoy's "Kholstomer."[20] The State Horse-breeding Board subsequently redoubled its efforts to investigate dubious lineages. But in the 1920s, when horse-racing seemed to exemplify the seamier side of NEP's get-rich-quick culture, readers of Il′f and Petrov's *Dvenadtsat′ stul′ev* (The Twelve Chairs, 1928) might have been tempted to put contemporary faces to the name of Count Drutskii, a fictional pre-revolutionary fixer sentenced to three years in prison for disguising his American cross-breed as an Orlov trotter and giving it a false pedigree.[21]

Ironically, not even impeccable pedigrees could benefit the Tersk stud in the 1960s, when its export potential in the market for elite Arabians was rapidly identified.[22] The Dutch horsemeat dealer, Ronald den Hartog, bought his first Tersk stallion in 1959 and his Kossack Stud (founded near Amsterdam in 1965 and still flourishing under the control of his son) became the main continental outlet.[23] In 1975, twelve years after the first Tersk horses went to the United States, American buyers snapped up fifteen of them at Stavropol′, paying a record $20,000 for a single broodmare.[24] Yet average prices were depressed by the ideologically-motivated refusal of the Arabian Horse Club Registry of America (AHCRA) to register horses imported from the USSR on the nominal grounds that their certification was untrustworthy. Owners protested the illogicality of a policy that simultaneously recognized horses purchased from communist Poland, although they, too, originated in the Caucasus. But under the leadership of Daniel C. Gainey, treasurer to Senator Barry Goldwater's Republican campaign for the presidency in 1964, the AHRCA remained resolutely anti-Soviet.[25] Not until Gainey's death in 1978 could American owners hope to sell their Soviet purchases at a premium. Only then could Soviet breeders again dream of "Tersk gold."[26]

While the fate of Tersk Arabian exports marked a perverse triumph for the graphosphere over the market, economics otherwise trumped the graphosphere. Despite the Soviet horse industry's conviction that profits from exports were potentially "limitless," the reality

[17] *Rech′ prisiazhnogo poverennogo N.P. Shubinskogo po delu o podmene rysaka* (Moscow, 1903).

[18] Vasilii Maklakov, *Iz vospominanii* (New York, 1954), 177–78.

[19] Iakov Butovich, *Loshadi moego serdtsa: Iz vospominanii konnozavodchika* (Moscow, 2013), 51–52.

[20] Aleksandr Kuprin, "Izumrud," in *Sobranie sochinenii v shesti tomakh*, eds. Sergei Chuprinin and Vsevolod Keldysh (Moscow, 1991–97), 3:154–68.

[21] Il′ia Il′f and Evgenii Petrov, *Dvenadtsat′ stul′ev* (Moscow, 1928), 58–59.

[22] See Oleg Balakshin, "Evoliutsiia arabskoi porody loshadei v SSSR i ee rol′ v uluchshenii konskogo pogolov′ia" (avtoreferat, kandidatskaia dissertatsiia, Moskovskaia sel′skokhoziaistvennaia akademiia imeni K.A. Timiriazeva, 1966).

[23] See https://kossack.com (accessed April 28, 2026).

[24] V. Pankov, "Vot tak nariadnaia!" *Izvestiia*, July 12, 1975, no. 162, 4.

[25] Tobi Lopez Taylor, "Politics and Pedigrees: America's Cold-War Era Arabian Horse Registration Debacle," *Cheiron: The International Journal of Equine and Equestrian History* 1, no. 1 (2021): 180–202, esp. 188–95.

[26] "Terskoe zoloto," *Pravda*, July 4, 1980, no. 186, 3.

was different.[27] Showing off the First Moscow Stud to Fidel Castro in January 1964, Nikita Khrushchev boasted that each pedigree horse sold would pay for up to five imported dairy cows.[28] But although a Rostov stud director assured the Party's Central Committee that foreign sales had made his breeding operation profitable, the *New York Times* counted "virtually no foreign buyer" at the first international horse fair at the Exhibition of National Economic Achievement (VDNKh) in July 1962.[29] The exception was the émigré fur-dealer Peter Provatoroff, on whom the Soviets relied to sell mediocre hunters in Britain. So great was the Soviet dependence on this single individual that his death in December 1963 not only punctured the British operation but depressed the annual international auctions in the USSR. Though they continued into the twenty-first century (conducted online during the Covid pandemic), they moved in 1971 to the relative obscurity of the First Moscow Stud, supplemented by sales at Rostov-on-Don, Stavropol′, and Piatigorsk.[30] While brilliant western-facing Soviet publicity targeted a shrinking hunting fraternity in the English-speaking world, clients attracted by low prices came mostly from continental Europe and Scandinavia. It was all a far cry from the "living gold" subsequently described in a fanciful account by the USSR's leading equestrian writer, Dmitrii Urnov.[31] Disguising Provatoroff as "Vaska Wijewatoff" and claiming that his family had been involved in Anglo-Russian trade since the time of Ivan the Terrible, Urnov falsely alleged that the Soviet champion jockey, Nikolai Nasibov, who never visited England, participated in a grand auction parade alongside the famous British trainer, Sir Gordon Richards.[32]

These contrasting fragments represent but a pale reflection of Simon Franklin's dazzling kaleidoscope. Nevertheless, taken collectively, all three serve to emphasize the lasting and often unintended economic impact of the visible written word. Almost everything to do with horses has always been connected with money. The graphosphere is no exception to the rule.

Simon Dixon read History at Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, where he was a Junior Research Fellow between 1987 and 1990. Following a Lectureship at the University of Glasgow, he became Professor of Modern History at the University of Leeds in 1999 and moved to UCL SSEES as Sir Bernard Pares Professor of Russian History in 2008. Dixon is joint editor of Oxford Studies in Modern European History and is writing a history of the horse in Russia since 1600.

[27] I. Kuznetsov and I. Bobylev, "Polezno, vygodno," *Pravda*, March 25, 1966, no. 84, 3 (letter from I. Kuznetsov, director of the Khrenovo stud in Voronezh province, founded by Count Aleksei Orlov in 1775 and purchased from his daughter by the state in 1845).

[28] "Tovarishch Fidel′ Kastro v Podmoskov′e," *Pravda*, January 20, 1964, no. 20, 1.

[29] "Informatsionnoe soobshchenie: O Plenume Tsentral′nogo Komiteta Kommunisticheskoi partii Sovetskogo Soiuza," *Pravda*, February 13, 1964, no. 44, 1 (G.L. Ryndin); "Soviet International Horse Fair Draws 200 Head, Few Buyers," *New York Times*, July 30, 1962, 19. Compare with B. Bogdanov, "Nebyvalaia iarmarka," *Izvestiia*, July 28, 1962, no. 178, 2.

[30] GuKON's B. Nakhutin wrote regular booster articles for *Pravda* and *Izvestiia*. See also his and T. Zhanuzakov's "I eta sila nuzhna," *Pravda*, January 30, 1969, no. 30, 2.

[31] Dmitrii Urnov (1936–2022), who interpreted for the director of the Moscow Hippodrome on visits to the US in the 1960s, combined his fanatical interest in harness racing with a career as a scholar of Shakespeare and Defoe. Appointed in 1988 as editor of *Voprosy literatury*, he remained after 1991 in the US, from where he had written in support of the putsch against Mikhail Gorbachev. See Urnov, *Confessions of a Soviet Survivor* (Garden City, 2003).

[32] Nikolai Nasibov and Dmitrii Urnov, *Life in the Saddle: The Story of Nikolai Nasibov as Told by Himself to Dmitri Urnov*, trans. David Marks (Moscow, 1977), 196–99, 212, first published as *Zheleznyi posyl, ili Zhizn′ v sedle* (Moscow, 1973), a characteristically intergeneric work purporting to be a ghosted (auto)biography of Nasibov.