

Freemasonry in Russia

Early Sources from the Russian State Archive of Ancient Acts, Moscow



From the Russian State Archive of Ancient Acts, Moscow

Freemasonry in Russia: Early sources

IDC Publishers is proud to announce the publication on microfiche of a unique collection of manuscripts and rare books indispensable for researching Freemasonry in Russia. The collection includes Masonic regulations, constitutions, books of rites, diplomas, the handwritten translations in Russian of mystic Masonic texts and original Russian Masonic writings. Most of the documents have never been published and copies can't be found in other archives. The collection includes documents in Russian, German, English and French.

Freemasonry in Russia

The history of Freemasonry is one of the most fascinating topics in the cultural history of the eighteenth and twentieth centuries. From the beginning Russian masonry was as an integral part of European masonry. In the 1830s, English Masonic lodges came into being whose members were not only Englishmen serving in Russia, but representatives of the Russian nobility as well. In the middle of the eighteenth century, lodges of French rite already existed in Russia that included Russian masons. According to some foreign observers, all the known European trends were represented in the Russian lodges towards the end of the eighteenth century.

According to Alexander I's ukase of 1822, participation in Masonic lodge activities by public service employees was strictly prohibited. In reality this decree implied the prohibition of masonry, since the overwhelming majority of masons in Russia belonged to the nobility and were employed in public service. Throughout the whole of the nineteenth century and up until 1905, only a few lodges in Russia were active in mystic masonry and these almost lost contact with the masonry movement in Europe.

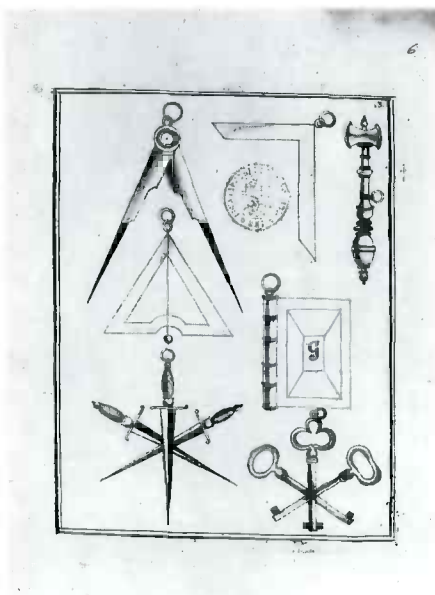
The October Manifesto of 1905 proclaimed the right of meetings and unions. Representatives of Russian masonry took advantage of this situation. By applying the manifesto, the Council of the Grand Order of Eastern France opened lodges in Moscow and Saint Petersburg.

After the October revolution of 1917 Russian masons continued their activities in exile, mainly in French lodges and in Russian lodges in France. In 1992 the Grand National Lodge of France installed the first new Masonic lodge in Moscow after a long interruption.

"Hidden" historical sources

Until recently scholars have been inhibited in their research by the absence of Masonic literature in most

libraries. The Order of Freemasons was a quasi-forbidden organization in Russia. Even in the period of the "Golden Age" of Russian masonry (1810-1822) the lodges were under direct surveillance by the Special Office of the Ministry of Home Affairs. Due to this peculiarity, preservation of Masonic archival collections often depended not so much on diligent secretaries or record-keepers, but on the efficiency of Russian security agencies. The mystery surrounding Masonic works in Russia is the result of the intention of some archive owners to disguise the very fact of their existence rather than the specific, mysterious nature of masonry itself. In the Soviet period, all twentieth century Masonic documents were kept as special collections with restricted access (spetskhran) whereas the masonry of the previous periods was deliberately glossed over.



Russian State Archive of Ancient Acts

Documents in the collection are kept in the Russian State Archives of Ancient Acts (RGADA) in Moscow. The Archive holds more than 3,3 million documents dating back to the beginning of the twentieth century. The Archive's collections comprise documents, issued from the highest echelons of government, central and local

authorities of the Russian Empire up to the beginning of the nineteenth century; administration of Russian monasteries; materials of land-surveys (from the eighteenth century to the beginning of the nineteenth); papers of the most prominent noble families of Russia, priceless collections of manuscripts and early printed books (staropechatnye knigi) from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and rare editions from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Elagin Collection

The collection describes the first stage of the development of Freemasonry in Russia dating back to the mid to late eighteenth century. The collection consists of two parts. The first was compiled as a single collection at the end of the eighteenth century, the so-called Elagin collection. It is no doubt the most famous among Russian Masonic collections. It includes mason regulations, constitutions, books of rites, diplomas from the eighteenth century and illustrations (engravings, tapis, etc.).

Privy Councilor Ivan Perfilevich Elagin (1725 - 1794) served as the Secretary of Catherine II's Cabinet. Elagin sat at the head of two so-called "Elagin's" groups within the Order, which united those Freemasons who had embraced British Masonic philosophy. In 1772 he received the diploma of Grand Provincial Master from the Grand Lodge of England. Thus he became the head of all the lodges in Russia belonging to the English system. Documents preserved from his archive also include the books of rites and regulations of Swedish masonry, as well as of other Masonic trends that existed in Russia. After I.P. Elagin's death his Masonic papers were taken to the State Archives together with official documents. These materials are currently kept as part of the following Fonds: Fond 8 (Gosarkhiv [State Archives]); Fond 146 (Rozysknye dela [Investigation cases]); Fond 154 (Zhalovannye gramoty [Charters]); Fond 168 (Snosheniia russkikh

gosudarei s pravitel'stvennymi mestami [Relations of Russian sovereigns with state institutions]).

Mazurin collection

The second part of the collection includes the handwritten translations in Russian of mystic Masonic texts and original Russian Masonic writings from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The printed sources represented here are in many cases equally rare and central to the history of Freemasonry in Russia and its relationship to European Freemasonry.

The collection of manuscripts of original Russian writings and handwritten translations in Russian of mystic Masonic texts was formed as a part of the Fedor Fedorovich Mazurin (1845 - 1898) collection. Mazurin was hereditary honorable citizen of Moscow and a well-known collector of books and manuscripts. During his lifetime, the F.F. Mazurin collection was closed to scientists. In 1899, in accordance with Mazurin's will, his collection was

transferred to the Moscow Archives of the Ministry of Justice. (These materials are now kept in Fond 196 in RGADA).

Masonic 'self-edition' (the bulk of the unpublished, but recopied manuscripts) was later known as Samizdat in Russia. In spite of official permission to open private publishing houses issued in 1783, almost all the printing houses that existed in Russia during this period belonged to the state and served the purposes of government, church and educational institutions. So the printing of manuscript editions was on the basis of private orders. Often the translations of foreign authors were circulated in this way. For a brief period Russian masons were leasing the printing house of the Moscow University. At the same time there functioned the secret mason printing-house. However, all these editions couldn't completely satisfy the requirements of an increasing number of masons. This situation explains the existence of mason-handwritten editions in Russia. The spread of handwritten books was partly due to the need for secrecy. The existence of numerous copies of the same texts

points to the fact that European literature and hermetics, Gnosticism and natural philosophy were widely spread in the Russian Empire. The printed sources represented here are in many cases equally rare and central to the history of Freemasonry in Russia and its relationship to European Freemasonry. Mazurin's collection includes such rarities as Fama Fraternitatis and Secret Symbols of the Rosicrucians, both in Russian, Russian translations of works by Paracelsus, Valentin Weigel, Johannes Arndt, Basilius Valentinus and others.

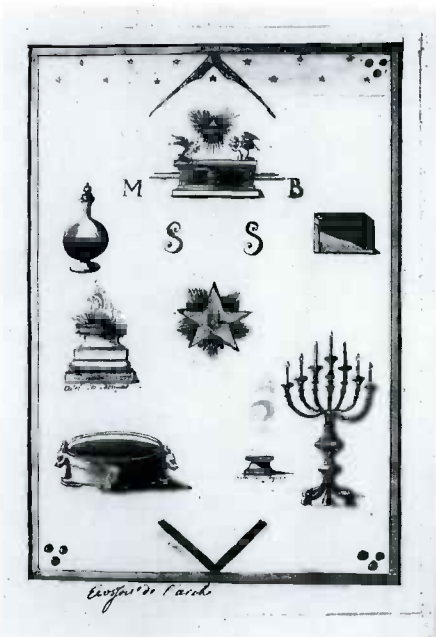
Several documents and manuscripts from the collection were used as items in the exhibition "500 years of Gnosis in Europe". (See catalogue "500 years of Gnosis in Europe: Exhibition of Printed Books and Manuscripts of Gnosis Tradition. Amsterdam, In de Pelikaan, 1993).

Dr. S. I. Smetanina

Russian State Archive of Ancient Acts

General information

Scope	32 items (manuscripts, correspondence)
Number of fiche	158
Size of fiche	105 x 148 mm
External finding aids	IDC printed guide prepared by Dr. Vadim Kadik
Order number	R-18877



All illustrations from: Russian State Archive of Ancient Acts (RGADA), Fond 8, Inventory (Opis') 1, File 216.