

UDC 94(47).084

**RUSSIAN PUPIL'S SCHOOL EXERCISE BOOKS:
A NEW SOURCE FOR THE STUDY OF TEACHING OF LITERACY
SKILLS IN THE 19TH CENTURY**

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Abstract

School exercise books constitute one of the most original sources for the historians of education who focus on the teaching of literacy skills. This article aims at analysing a sample of Russian school exercise books in order to study some new aspects of the history of Russian schooling, by focusing on the writing exercises of two of Tolstoy's pupils (1861) and on some compositions by children from the Tsarist schools of Kiev, Černigov and Tula (1910–16).

Keywords: Russia, 19th century, Lev N. Tolstoy, literacy, school exercise books.

Over the last decade, the studies on “school exercise books” [1–3] have become more and more important in the history of education. In Russia, these studies have mostly focused on the exercise books (in Russian, *učeničeskaja tetrad'*) of the school founded in Yasnaya Polyana in 1861 by the famous writer Lev N. Tolstoy (1828–1910) as well as on the culture of childhood in the classes of Russian nobles and princes [4, 5].

These studies – presenting school exercise book covers and several pages written by Tolstoy's pupils or by the Tsar in their childhood – reveal that, from the end of the 19th century, the use of school exercise books with their characteristic blue cover spread in Russian urban schools. Yet despite the development of the school system after 1864, the literacy level of the peasantry in the Russian countryside remained quite low: in general, children abandoned school after only one year of attendance. One of the reasons for this was that the change in the country school administration system (from peasant communes to local peasant administrations) between 1880–1914 did not lead to any qualitative improvement [6].

From the end of the 19th century, indeed, school exercise books progressively superseded the sheet of paper folded into four parts by pupils (because it was too big to handle). The modest spread of school exercise books in Russian schools at the beginning of the century is also attested by a debate between pedagogues and hygienists concerning their form and whether or not they should be lined, and if so, how [2, p. 1052–1060].

Nevertheless, the use of school exercise books allegedly became more and more common not after the 1917 Revolution and the foundation of the Unified Labour School (September 30th, 1918) but rather with the introduction of compulsory primary education on July 25th, 1930, which was followed by the development of junior

and secondary schools, in particular those with a technical or professional orientation [8, p. 158–180].

Although literacy was to become a mass phenomenon for the new State which aimed at educating would-be communist citizens, the creation of school exercise book archives was an exceptional project which involved many writers, pedagogues and parents interested in documenting particular schooling processes and individual curricula which have been significant for the country as a whole.

Thus, the present essay intends to study the content of a dozen school exercise books (chosen from the collections which have been uncovered and which are listed below) in order to reconstruct the evolution of the teaching of literacy skills in the context of the changes introduced by the Tsarist reforms. These school exercise books were found in the personal archive collections of renowned pedagogues, conserved in the Archive of the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences of the Russian Federation (APN):

a. In the collection of Nikolaj Vladimirovič Čechov there are, among others, the Russian language exercise books of a girl called Valja Kurljand (1910–1911) [9]. N.V. Čechov (1865–1947) was a renowned Soviet pedagogue engaged in the field of teaching skills, and member of the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic. After attending the Faculty of Philology and History of the University of Saint Petersburg, in 1888 he became the head of an institute in Bogorodskoe (province of Tula). He devoted himself to the training and education of teachers, he was the chairman of the Board for female courses in Moscow, while after the Revolution he was active inside the People's Commissariat for Education. He is the author of several works on the history of Russian schooling, children's literature and the methodology of teaching the Russian language to non-Russian nationalities [10, p. 99–101].

b. In the "Archival Materials of State Institutions, Social Organizations and Private Citizens" there is a collection of 19 exercise books of the 2nd and 4th years of the primary school in Elionka (Černigov) and of the commercial institute in Kiev, which belonged to the pupil Vasilij Ja. Parchomenko. In these school exercise books we can find calligraphy, dictation, Old Church Slavonic, compositions, French, German, commercial geography, arithmetic and accountancy (1910–1916) [9].

This article will examine these collections of elementary and junior school exercise books belonging to the Tsarist period with a particular focus on the history of the teaching of literacy skills [11] and on the evolution of school practices within the more general framework of Russian school reforms [12, p. 130]. The paper is divided into two parts: the first part focuses on the school exercise books by Tolstoy's pupils, the second on those of the pupils of some Russian schools. In addition to this comparison, this analysis will also try to link the content of these exercise books with contemporary reading books or textbooks.

The available school exercise books from the Tsarist period make it possible to highlight some phases of the evolution of the teaching of composition writing, revealing several new aspects about the history of literacy. This section is based on the compositions of some pupils from the school founded in Yasnaya Poljana by Lev N. Tolstoy

and on those of the pupils of the Tsarist elementary schools of Černigov, Kiev and Tula (of the period 1910–1916), which are indicative both of Tolstoy's interest towards children's writing skills and the assimilation of different educational models (literary influences or the direct observation of nature).

In the Russian countryside the use of school exercise books was almost unknown until the end of the 19th century. The children of the school founded in 1861 in Yasnaya Polyana (in the province of Tula) by Lev N. Tolstoy were undoubtedly among the first to use them for written exercises. The foundation of this school, which had been preceded by private lessons since October 1859, took inspiration both from the peasant literacy schools (*školy gramoty*) organized by rural communities to conform to their local requirements [6, p. 570–571] and from Tolstoy's pedagogy based on Rousseau's conception [13].

While, on the one hand, the school reform of 1864 established a well-defined method for learning the alphabet (using the phonics model) and introduced grammar, syntax and dictation exercises to help children learn to write, on the other hand, it neglected composition [14, p. 220–223]. It is for this reason that the famous author of "War and Peace" (1863–1869) decided to share his art of writing with his pupils, considering the peasant culture as a complex system worthy of expression in the written language, thus making it possible to replace or indeed abandon the oral tradition of cultural transmission [13, p. 47].

A collection of 143 pages of school exercise books has been conserved [4], which includes some very interesting children's compositions showing the scant attention paid to calligraphy and grammar – which Tolstoy believed should follow, not precede the creative process [15, S. 120–121]. Indeed, it is well known that in his essay Tolstoy described his new method of teaching composition to peasant children, who, in his view, had undoubtedly innate literary skills: "The main art of the teacher in teaching the language and the main exercise that he pursues in this goal in leading the children to compose consists in living, but not really in living, as much as in presenting a big choice, in indicating the length of the composition, in defining the initial methods. <...> They did not understand the most important thing: why writing and why is it so nice? They did not understand the art, that is the beauty of the expression of life in words and the passion for this art" [16, p. 301].

Pupils' writing became one of Tolstoy's favourite activities. Two compositions are particularly interesting because they describe the school life and the educational methods in the Yasnaya Poljana school and, probably, also in those schools of the Tula province which had adopted Tolstoy's methods of teaching literacy skills. The first composition is by Ignat Makarov, known as Semka (1849–1897), written on March 18th 1863, when he was 14¹: "In recent years we studied very well with Lev Nikolaevič. We learnt well because we had three teachers: Vladimir Aleksandrovič, Ivan Ivanovič, Gustav Fedorovič but also Lev Nikolaevič often came in our class. There were about 35 children attending the school and we were divided into three classes: the oldest, the ones in the middle and the youngest.

¹ Here and in successive extracts, the translation seeks to reproduce the grammatical and stylistic idiosyncrasies of the original.

I was in the class of the older pupils, there were seven of us and we had the worst of the teachers, Soldier Vladimir Aleksandrovič who taught us mathematics and geometry. We were very scared of him. Ivan Ivanovič was the teacher of the middle class he wasn't a bad man and when he begins to talk or ask questions, he makes everybody laugh. And if he gets angry with somebody, he would beat on the floor with a foot and start to laugh himself because he is not able to get angry; he teaches reading and writing to the pupils of the second class. Gustav Fedorovič was German and only held drawing lessons and he was quiet he never scolded nor beat anybody and told us how it was nice in Ermany, that it was summer and almost never winter" [4, p. 170–171].

The following composition is by Vasilij Morozov, known as Fed'ka (1849–1914) – frequently mentioned in Tolstoy's writing – and is particularly precious, because it describes the methods of learning the alphabet elaborated by Tolstoy: "And that's why I decided to go to school: before I used to study at home, but I didn't feel like it and so I did not learn anything about the alphabet at home. After a while the elder-chief (*starosta*) toured villages saying to all the children to go to school. I got dressed very quickly. I got dressed and I went to Kirjuška and I say: Kirja! Get dressed quickly, the elder-chief *starosta* said we should go study, Kirjuška was happy too and after having got dressed we went to the mountain as well. And we saw that there were a lot of children, they were waiting for us, and we got near him and we went together. We walked up the mountain and we see that Nikiška is coming, we run towards him and shouted Niki! We sit down next to you. Nikiška says: all right. When we arrived at the house, we took off our hats and we see that Lev Nikolaevič is arriving, we bowed deeply. Afterwards we had class where before there was the office. Then Lev Nikolaevič wrote the A (*AZY*). That's how we learnt A B V G and so on. And so we did learn, thank God! We learnt A (*AZY*) in a day and a half. The day after we went to school again. Here I say: Lev Nikolaevič! Let's learn A B V G. Lev Nikolaevič says: it won't take long to learn them. The second and the third day we began to learn syllables (*sklady*), and I say: it won't take long to learn them. Lev Nikolaevič says: you will learn syllables quicker than letter A" [4, p. 171].

In the previous passage, the reference is clear to Tolstoy's listening method (*sluchovoj metod*) as opposed to the sounding-out method (*zvukovoj metod*) used in Tsarist schools after the reform of 1864 [13, p. 53; 17, p. 50]. Indeed, in 1872, Tolstoy published a new primer in which he presented the method consisting in learning the consonants pronounced with the vocals *e* and then the consequent assimilation of the syllables drawn from entire words in order to avoid the mechanical repetition typical of the Russian peasants' traditional learning method [18, p. 135].

Tolstoy believed that this method was more suitable to the innate capacities of Russian peasant children. These free compositions, often published by Tolstoy in the pedagogical review "Yasnaya Polyana", highlight both the subjective aspects of narration and the children's literary creativity that he tried to stimulate thanks to a copious production of children's literature.

If we now compare the compositions of Tolstoy's pupils with those of Tsarist school pupils, we notice a considerable difference not only between those of rural and urban school pupils, but also between the urban schools of the Tsarist Empire. This is due first of all to the fact that the school reform of 1864 had not prepared any

curriculum for the three levels of elementary schools existing at that time: the 3-year schools of the local Tsarist administrations (*zemstva*), the primary schools of the Ministry and the so called “one-class schools” (the majority until 1897) [6, p. 563, 567]. One of the first curricula was published in 1887 and granted particular importance to religion and to Old Church Slavonic (9 out of 24 hours a week), although most of the day was dedicated to reading and writing (10 hours) and to mathematics (5 hours). Some *zemstva* added other subjects such as natural science, history and geography to the elementary school curriculum, extending by a year the existing three-year period, or forming schools with two courses lasting four and five years respectively [17, p. 47–51].

In the Russian elementary school of the end of the 19th century, reading was the most important school activity, based mainly on the phonic method and practised aloud (individually or collectively). Writing, initially limited to calligraphy exercises, engendered the need and desire to teach how to structure a description and to deal with a particular theme [19, p. 84–90]. In 1899, N. Curikov, a teacher at the Moscow Alexander Commercial School [19, p. III–VIII], published a textbook on composition writing in which he presented an outline (*plan*) for each subject; these schemas were to be used in the Soviet Union until the post-World War II period [19, p. V–VI]. Curikov described particular types of composition for the 2nd–4th years of elementary school and a composition method tied to the class's level.

In the 2nd year, the pupils would write their compositions after listening to the reading aloud a model and after laying down a plan, under the teacher's supervision. After a first correction of the composition in class (followed by a correction at home), the pupils had to carry out a compulsory revision of their compositions, copying the entire corrected text out again and presenting it in class to be awarded the final mark [19, p. V–VI].

From the 4th year on, compositions were based on literary passages and poems, which would first be read and commented in class and then analysed in a written composition at home. Since a specific plan had not yet been prepared, for the first composition exercises, Curikov suggested the description of paintings (to be found in catechism, history, geography and natural history textbooks) after an initial group observation followed by a description model and by an oral description of the composition. During the following lesson, the pupils had to write the description according to the plan prepared. As well as the description of the painting, they could write about anthology passages read in class or learnt by heart at home, enriched with the use of their imagination. In the 4th and 5th years, compositions about history and literature were also foreseen [19, p. 7–8].

This kind of compositions with drawings or comments on literary passages and poems became very common in Russian schools, as is also demonstrated by exercise books from urban schools (of the period 1910–1916), where 4-year attendance was the norm [17, p. 47–48]. Among the 2nd year school exercise books of a little girl, Valja Kurljand, the composition exercise book is particularly nice, with her neat child's handwriting and a watercolour drawing spanning two pages. It is worth reading one passage to better understand this kind of exercise which usually depicted a pleasant scene from the Russian countryside – as did the poems (see anthologies by A. Baranov and N. Bunakov [17, p. 51–54]: “This picture shows men and women who go to reap the rye with sickles and bill-hooks. Behind the tree and in front [there is] a field

in which the rye grows. They walk and sing cheerful songs. In the field it is so nice that they don't want to go away" [9, d. 464, l. 40 ob].

Valja also wrote some brief compositions about animals, almost always in the style of a fable, with a more or less explicit moral content. In another essay the girl draws six little tables to describe the little story of a duck and her ducklings: "1. This picture shows a duck swimming in the lake with her ducklings. 2. Suddenly a hawk comes and grasps one of the ducklings. 3. The duck was about to grasp the duckling but the hawk planed off and flew away with the duckling. 4. The poor mother couldn't punish the hawk. 5. Now she doesn't swim in that lake anymore. 6. She swims in another lake with her ducklings" [9, d. 464, l. 39–40].

Several drawings also decorate her poetry exercise book, which contains a collection of verses written by the girl and of some poems (recopied) by major Russian poets of the 19th century such as Aleksandr S. Puškin (1799–1837), Apollon N. Majkov (1821–1897), Afanasij A. Fet (1820–1892) and Aleksej N. Pleščeev (1825–1893). This is a school exercise book made from thick paper (dated 1910) and it was surely used for learning the poetry by heart [9, d. 464, l. 1–17, 18–36].

Moving on to a composition by a 3rd year pupil – Vasily Ja. Parchomenko of the Elionka School in Černigov (1911–1912) – about the forest during Fall, we notice the presence of several literary quotations in the description of nature. After having observed the changes during a walk with his comrades, the pupil continued with a typical depiction of Russian nature: "From the mass of the trees here and there one could discern a red trunk of pine with a green top and a white trunk of birch. These trees gave a bit of colour to the sad picture of the naked forest. The forest was silent and empty. There was no cheerful singing nor bird melody. But then the sun went down and there was darkness in the wood. The tops of the trees darkened and became even more melancholic. The trees merged in one single mass. It wasn't possible to distinguish the trees anymore. In the sky, behind the grey clouds, one could notice the golden sickle moon. We went home. With the autumnal raining weather, the forest has a completely different aspect. Everything was shrouded in mist. Everywhere is wet and grey. <...> During Fall the aspen is nice. Its leaves become red and yellow and, during the sunset, golden. With a little puff of wind, they rustle and flutter". S. Aksakov [1791–1859] describes the aspen as follows: 'the aspen with its vibrating leaves, invisible to all, becomes pretty and is noticed only in Fall: its withered leaves soon turn golden and purple, which makes them clearly show up among the green of the other trees and confers much beauty and variety to the forest during the autumn leaf fall'. With bad weather the forest in autumn is silent and bare, with some rare noisy hammering of a hatchet, which is the mortal stroke for the tree. A lot of writers have written about the Fall. Here is one of A. Majkov's [1821–1897] poems: 'The autumn leaves give the alarm: Everything is dying, everything is dying! You are black and naked, my beloved wood, your end has come. Majestic as it is, it does not hear this alarm, under the blue severe skies. It falls into a deep sleep while the force of a new spring slowly grows'" [20, d. 254, l. 2–2 ob].

This composition got a good mark by the teacher with almost no correction. Usually Parchomenko's school exercise books are all very interesting. In comparison with those of handwriting, dictation and mathematics – which definitely show a good use of graphic spaces [11] – the Old Church Slavonic exercise book is a little master-

piece in its own right, due to the ability demonstrated by the pupil in tracing the letters of the Glagolitic alphabet. It is a rare testimony of the learning of the sacred language of the Orthodoxy in Tsarist schools. The catechism exercise book also shows that copying and repetition were at the basis of school learning before the Revolution [14, p. 172–173].

Among the compositions of the pupils of the 3rd year, the most famous are those collected by a teacher, Leonila S. Strunina (1869–1913), head of the municipal school in Kiev, who published a grammar book with drawings by some children. In these compositions (from 1912), the children of the town made no reference to rural work but tried to express subjective impressions derived from the observation of nature: “Autumn. This nature is boring, boring and gloomy. Tears stream down, down from the high skies; the fields and the meadows are damp. The small birds stopped to sing and the wood became sad. In the morning a pale sun already casts its rays and the skylark’s song is no more to be heard. In the Dnepr, during the sunrise, the gaggles of geese are no more to be seen. And the bees don’t fly from the ‘honeycomb cell’ of the larva anymore. And the morning fogs come down on the land, as if it was the sea and the dew lays down as a silver layer. It is a rainy and boring period!

Winter. The terrible winter has begun. A white snow has fallen on the fields and villages. All the leaves have fallen from the trees. The river is covered with ice. The children slowly run to school through the freezing air. When the children come out of school, they go home, have lunch, get their skates and go ice-skating. Some are on skis, others go on skates, others have a sledge and so on” [21, p. 99].

As well as these observations about the seasons, giving a cross section of children’s everyday life in Russia, it is also interesting to read the description of one 3rd year scholar about the celebration of the third centenary of the Romanov dynasty: “On February 12th, 1912 we celebrated the three hundred years of the Romanovs. Three hundred years have passed since the beginning of the Romanov dynasty. The first Romanov Tsar was Michajl Fedorovič Romanov. Michajl Fedorovič was a charming and intelligent young man. At first his mother, the nun Marfa, didn’t want to give this already predestined Tsar to the Russian people, but, when all the people asked her to give him to them and blessed him for the Kingdom, she agreed and all the people were very satisfied with this intelligent, generous and young Tsar. <...> We celebrated the three hundred years of the Romanovs and we cheered up to wait for this happy event. We had a literary day. We had history and poetry lessons. All our school rejoiced in celebration. In the town all the houses had been tidied up and the flags were hanging out, waving in the air as proud as eagles. A flag waved out of our school as well, in memory of an incipient solemnity. After the literary morning I went back home and saw the little book that my teacher had given me as a present, then I went out in the street and in the little clearing in front of our home I could hear some military music. All this marked a solemn celebration!” [21, p. 100].

This historical day commemorated the Tsarist monarchy for whom pupils had to repeat a prayer before and after lessons. This prayer for the Tsar and the homeland was printed on the second page of the school diary and was followed by a genealogy of the Imperial family of the Tsar [22].

The comparison between these compositions highlights an evolution of the teaching of literacy skills, besides an important diversity of the themes of the urban

schools: Leonila Strunina of Kiev demonstrated the application of the new methods of active pedagogy [23]. This diversity probably also occurred in rural schools, where the teachers sometimes took inspiration from Tolstoy's methods for the teaching of literacy skills. The compositions of the pupils from the Golubickaja school of the *zemstvo* (Province of Tula) are full of episodes from peasant life and descriptions of domestic pedagogy, drawn up with a style very similar to that of Tolstoy's pupils, characterised by objects without adjectives and by actions without adverbs [24].

It is worth reading a very short composition echoing Tolstoy's famous tale "Filipok", which narrates the history of a child admitted to school even if he was younger than the others: "Then I got up, put on my shoes, stepped down from the stove and began to wash myself, my grandmother says: Come here, I won't let you go in the street. I say: You don't have to send me into the street, you have to send me to school. And she says: But how will you go? Your *lapti* are worn through. These words scared me, I took the books and, after hiding, I went to school. While I was walking I thought: When I go back, grandma will kill me" [21, p. 121].

On the basis of the comparison between these compositions, we have seen not only the progressive dissemination of Tolstoy's pedagogy aimed at increasing children's creative writing skills, but also the adoption of the models of pedagogical activism in teaching which prevailed after the 1917 Revolution to be later abandoned with the spread of totalitarian pedagogy. More recent studies have analysed the change of content in school exercise books in Soviet Russia in order to focus the new regime's assimilation process of culture and language in the different phases and contexts of its ideological evolution. Among others, Alla Salnikova and Vitalij Bezrogov have dedicated their research to the evolution of topics and values emerging from children's writings in the Soviet period [1; 25; 26].

School exercise books show a particular attention toward the new methodologies of teaching before the 1917 Revolution, which introduced several reforms and experimentations. This trend was interrupted by Stalin who restored traditional subjects as well as strict school discipline, a matter that will be discussed elsewhere. The history of school exercise books opens up new perspectives for the comprehension of the educational process and curricula in Russia, since they show us continuities and changes, which are normally invisible to historians dealing with the institutional history of schooling.

Аннотация

Кароли Дорена. Школьные тетради русских детей: новый источник для изучения преподавания навыков письменной речи в XIX в.

Школьные тетради представляют собой один из наиболее оригинальных источников для историков образования, занимающихся изучением преподавания навыков письменной речи. Работа посвящена анализу русских школьных тетрадей, в ходе которого выявляются новые стороны в развитии русской школы. Особое внимание уделено письменным упражнениям двух учеников Л.Н. Толстого (1861) и некоторым школьным сочинениям, написанным учениками киевских, черниговских и тульских школ царской России (1910–1916).

Ключевые слова: Россия, XIX век, Л.Н. Толстой, грамотность, школьные тетради.

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Received
April 10, 2014

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