

THE ORIGINS OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN RUSSIA: FROM IMITATION TO NATIONAL INDEPENDENCE

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Abstract: This article examines the origins and evolution of children's literature in Russia from the 18th century to the early 19th century. It analyzes the influence of European literary models, spiritual heritage, and the educational reforms of Peter I, Catherine II, and their contemporaries. Special attention is paid to the transformation of pedagogical and literary ideals, the impact of sentimentalism and Enlightenment ideas on children's reading habits, and the gradual emergence of a national literary and educational tradition in Russia. The article highlights the transition from mere imitation of foreign examples to the formation of an independent Russian children's literature identity rooted in national culture and values.

Keywords: Children's literature in Russia, Russian educational reforms, Peter the Great and education, Catherine II and children's literature, Sentimentalism in Russian literature, Enlightenment ideas in education, Russian national literature, 18th-century Russian pedagogy, Moral education in Russia, Russian literary heritage for children.

The emergence of **children's literature** in Russia was a multifaceted and gradual process characterized by phases of imitation, pedagogical experimentation, and ideological searching. For much of the early period, there were no books specifically written for children; instead, young readers encountered **religious texts**, moralistic literature, or translated foreign works not adapted to children's developmental needs¹.

From Spiritual Reading to Secular Enlightenment

Before the 18th century, **religious education** dominated children's reading. The secularization of education began with the sweeping reforms of **Peter the Great (Peter I)**, which introduced Western ideas and practices to Russian society. However, the concept of **children's literature as a separate genre** was not yet developed. Children often received **translated foreign books** that were rarely tailored for their comprehension or interests².

A key example of this transitional phase is the publication of **Zrelishche prirody i khudozhestv (Spectacle of Nature and the Arts, 1784–1789)**, which combined **illustrations** with popular scientific and moralistic texts³. Although not explicitly targeted at children, the accessible language and engaging visuals attracted young readers and marked an early step towards child-focused literature.

Educational Ideals of Catherine II.

In the late 18th century, Russian pedagogy became heavily influenced by Enlightenment thinkers such as **John Locke**, **Jean-Jacques Rousseau**, and **Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi**. **Empress Catherine II** sought to mold a "new man" through progressive education⁴. Under her reign, institutions like the **Foundling Home (Vospitatelny dom)** were founded, with plans drafted by Prince Ivan Betskoy that emphasized moral and intellectual upbringing⁵.

Catherine's own literary creations, including the allegorical tales **Prince Chlorus** and **Fevyey the Red Sun**, reflect her Enlightenment ideals of **moral education**, **benevolent governance**, and the shaping of ethical character⁶. These works laid the groundwork for Russian literature aimed at children and youth.

Foreign Influences and Sentimentalism

Throughout the late 18th century, the Russian children's literature market was dominated by Western European influences. Translations of **sentimental novels** and moralistic stories by authors such as **Genlis**, **Gessner**, **Meissner**, and **Bernardin de Saint-Pierre** were popular⁷. These works often explored themes of emotional sensitivity, suffering, and love, reflecting the **sentimentalism** movement, though sometimes their themes were not entirely appropriate for children.

Alongside this, educational primers like **Russian Reading by Volynsky (1816)** appeared, which approached children more as recipients of **moral instruction** than as active learners⁸. This period marks the tension between didacticism and the emerging focus on child-centered pedagogy.

The Emergence of a National Approach

Despite the dominance of foreign literary models, the late 18th and early 19th centuries witnessed the beginnings of a **distinct Russian children's literature** tradition. Works such as **A Walk with Children through Russia**, **Conversations on Agriculture**, and **Children's Museum** began to depict authentic Russian settings, landscapes, occupations, and social realities⁹.

At the same time, cultural figures like **Nikolai Novikov** and **Ivan Schwartz** fostered **philological circles** and educational workshops, which nurtured young writers in the art of creating and editing texts specifically for children¹⁰. This movement signaled the shift towards a **national literary identity** that integrated Russian folklore, language, and ethical values.

Conclusion

The development of children's literature in Russia was a complex, contradictory, and lengthy process. Starting from imitation and direct borrowing of Western European models, Russian writers and educators gradually moved towards forming their own forms of **moral and educational guidance** tailored to Russian children. By the end of the 18th century, children's literature began to incorporate **national themes**, reflecting the realities of Russian life, popular mentality, and cultural values.

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