
Birth of the Thick Journal: Gerhard Müller and *Monthly Compositions*

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Рецензия на книгу: А. Г. Готовцева, "Сие есть наиполезнейшее для российского общества:" Журнал "Ежемесячные сочинения" как российский интеграционный просвещенческий проект середины XVIII века. Москва: Издательский Дом ЯСК, 2018. 369 с. ISBN: 9785907117358.

Review of: A. G. Gotovtseva, "Sie est' naipoleznejsee dlia rossiiskogo obshchestva": Zhurnal "Ezhemesiachnye sochineniia" kak rossiiskii integratsionnyi prosveshchencheskii proekt serediny XVIII veka. Moscow: Izdatel'skii Dom IaSK, 2018. 369 p. ISBN: 9785907117358.

In the late 1770s, the Russian-German academic Gerhard Friedrich Müller (1705-83) paused from his hectic routine to jot down the milestones of an eventful career spanning more than five decades. His brief memoir detailed an immense range of activity: transcontinental explorations through Siberia; scholarly research in ethnography, history, geography, and cartography; cataloguing rare archival materials; publishing books, newspapers, journals, and historic documents; and even managing the Moscow Foundling Home, a job he loathed. He earned honorary membership in academies and learned associations across Europe and Russia, and in 1767 represented the Academy of Sciences at the Legislative Commission. A true state servant in the mold of Peter the Great, Müller finished his chronicle with a tersely worded vow to “continue doing useful work to the last hour of my life so long as God keeps me alive.”¹ Despite his foreign origins, Müller earned a spot in Russia’s intellectual elite alongside native-speaking luminaries like Aleksandr Sumarokov and Mikhail Lomonosov, the latter his most bitter rival in the Academy. In 1772, when Nikolai Novikov issued his *Historical Dictionary of Russian Writers*, the journalist lauded Müller as a “learned man, worthy of great praise for his many useful works.”²

Müller is now remembered for his contributions to Siberian historiography and his controversial theory on the “Varangian” origins of the ancient Rus’. In light of this impressive legacy, it is telling that he considered the Academy of Sciences’ journal *Ezhemesiachnye sochineniia* (*Monthly Compositions*) to be his greatest achievement. “Of all my compositions,” he wrote, “this is, perhaps, the most useful for Russian society.”³ This statement provides the inspiration for the title of Anastasia Gotovtseva’s new book. Throughout its ten-year run from 1755 through 1764, *Ezhemesiachnye sochineniia* created—

¹ G. F. Müller, “Opisanie moikh sluzhb,” in *Istoriia Sibiri*, volume one (Moscow: Izdatel'skaia firma “Vostochnaia literatura,” 1999), 157.

² N. Novikov, *Opyt istoricheskago slovaria o rossiiskikh pisatelei. Iz raznykh pechatnykh i rukopisnykh knig, soobshchennykh izvestii, i slovesnykh predanii* (St. Petersburg, 1772), 141.

³ Müller, “Opisanie moikh sluzhb,” 154.

and catered to—a well-rounded, refined, and educated public. Despite the many obstacles standing in Müller's way, he believed its lively and varied content would have wide appeal. It turned out that his expectations were premature. Like other government-funded publications of the time, *Ezhemesiachnye sochineniia* was printed in huge quantities: 2,000 copies per issue for the first three years and 1,200 for the last seven. The Academy never factored in low consumer demand and sales for the journal remained stubbornly low throughout its existence. In its inaugural year, *Ezhemesiachnye sochineniia* typically sold only 239 copies per issue, a meager 12% of its print run. By 1762 and 1763, sales in St. Petersburg dipped below 100 per issue (p. 21).

Of course, publishing in eighteenth-century Russia was an uphill battle and few journals survived for long without state subsidies or well-connected patrons. Not until the 1780s did a sufficiently broad readership exist for a journal like *Moskovskie vedomosti* (*The Moscow News*), and it took a veteran salesman like Nikolai Novikov to find the formula for marketing it to the public.⁴ Moreover, books and journals occupied only a tiny share of space for the written word. Simon Franklin's recent work on the Russian "graphosphere" has unveiled a rich landscape of written artifacts, everything from icons, coins, medals, beard tokens, collectibles, and textiles to government decrees, signposts, blank forms, triumphal arches, and monumental inscriptions. And although the quantity of conventional printed material grew exponentially beginning with Peter the Great's reign, handwritten manuscripts displayed remarkable resilience within the governmental and private spheres.⁵ Prior to 1783, when Catherine II permitted private presses to operate, the space of print corresponded to the elite domain of church and state power. Meanwhile, Russia witnessed the steady growth in writers and readers who carried on pre-Petrine practices of small-scale reading communities engaged with handwritten materials.⁶ Trained as scribes and clerics, they possessed what Marshall Poe has called "administrative literacy"⁷ and constituted a potential, yet ultimately untapped, audience for elite publications such as *Ezhemesiachnye sochineniia*.

If Müller faltered in energizing and expanding his readership, he did succeed in promoting what Gotovtseva aptly calls an "integrationist enlightenment project." To support his efforts, he recruited writers from the first generation of Russia's secular intelligentsia. Together they came to form their own community of readers and writers, who, despite their claims to speak for the public, represented a rather narrow cohort of imperial Russian society. They included playwrights, poets, and translators (Vasilii Trediakovskii, Aleksandr Sumarokov, Mikhail Kheraskov, Ivan Elagin, Andrei Nartov, Grigorii Kozitskii, Grigorii Teplov, and even Müller's opponent Lomonosov); historians and geographers (Fedor Soimonov, Petr Rychkov, Mikhail Shcherbatov); and various European

⁴ Gary Marker, *Publishing, Printing, and the Origins of Intellectual Life in Russia, 1700-1800* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), chapter four.

⁵ Simon Franklin, *The Russian Graphosphere, 1450-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 64-101, 147-60, 197-99.

⁶ See Gary Marker, "The Eighteenth Century: From Reading Communities to a Reading Public," in Damiano Rebecchini and Raffaella Vassena, eds., *Reading Russia: A History of Reading in Modern Russia*, volume one (Milan: Ledizioni, 2020), 98-111.

⁷ Marshall Poe, "Elite Service Registry in Muscovy, 1500-1700," *Russian History*, 21:3 (Fall 1994), 286-88.

intellectuals, whose works appeared in translation (Voltaire, D'Alembert, Buffon, Linnaeus, Condamine, Alexander Pope, Samuel Johnson, Johann von Justi). Its most dedicated contributor was Müller himself, who authored or translated nearly 70 items, including his histories of Siberia and ancient Novgorod. *Ezhemesiachnye sochineniia*, moreover, enabled Müller to pluck new writers out of obscurity, and many of its alumni went on to establish or manage their own publications: Kheraskov with *Poleznoe uveselenie (Useful Entertainment)*, Sumarokov with *Trudoliubivaia pchela (Busy Bee)*, and Nartov with the *Trudy (Transactions)* of the Free Economic Society.

As Russia's first thick journal, *Ezhemesiachnye sochineniia* occupied a seminal niche in the country's graphosphere. In contrast to the Academy's previous publications, it strove to activate a community of "patriotic readers" (p. 24) whose curiosity would render them useful and inspire them to become writers themselves.⁸ Rather than examine *Ezhemesiachnye sochineniia* as a chapter in the history of Russian journalism, however, Gotovtseva situates it in the broader context of the European and Russian Enlightenments. This is no easy task—not only does the journal evade easy categorization, but "enlightenment" is an inherently slippery concept, particularly in the Russian context.⁹ Clearly, *Ezhemesiachnye sochineniia* embodied *prosveshchenie* (enlightenment, education) in the broad sense of the word, and it shared the same pedagogical goals as Moscow University, also the creation of ambitious educational "projectors."¹⁰ Yet beyond promoting an engaged public with varied reading tastes, it still lacked a unifying theme or agenda. Thumbing through a random number from 1759, for instance, we find installments from Petr Rychkov's *Orenburg History* and Voltaire's *Zadig*; two brief descriptions of women writers in England and Italy; and a remedy for treating corns and calluses. The remaining 119 issues offered a similarly eclectic range of *belles lettres*, translations, scholarship, and science.

Is it even possible to construct a coherent history atop a publication like *Ezhemesiachnye sochineniia*, so encyclopedic in scope, without imposing one's *a priori* assumptions on its content? The figure of Müller himself offers a potentially unifying narrative thread, but his editorial persona remains frustratingly enigmatic. Moreover, in contrast to the Free Economic Society's *Trudy*, whose editors left behind a voluminous archival record, *Ezhemesiachnye sochineniia* lacks a comparable paper trail. Aside from Müller's personal correspondence with select contributors, the main source is the journal itself, which Gotovtseva investigates in painstaking detail. Following an introductory chapter that traces the journal's origins, she groups its contents into three tiers: *belles lettres*, social sciences, and natural sciences. Chapter Two examines the literary section, focusing on the poets,

⁸ See Müller's preface to the first number of volume one: "Preduvedomlenie," *Ezhemesiachnyia sochineniia k pol'ze i uveseleniiu sluzhashchiia* (January 1755), 3-13.

⁹ For an overview of the various meanings and applications of "enlightenment" in eighteenth-century Russia, see Simon Dixon, "Prosveshchenie': Enlightenment in eighteenth-century Russia," in Richard Butterwick and Simon Davies, eds., *Peripheries of the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2008), 229-250.

¹⁰ Igor Fedyukin, *The Projectors: The Politics of School in Early Modern Russia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 186-200; I. P. Kulakova, *Universitetskoe prostranstvo i ego obitateli: Moskovskii universitet v istoriko-kul'turnoi srede XVIII veka* (Moscow: Novyi khronograf, 2006), 27-47.

playwrights, and translators for whom *Ezhemesiachnye sochineniia* offered the fastest, if not only, way to reach an audience beyond the court, Academy, and private circles. Chapter Three addresses the contributions of historians, ethnographers, and geographers, writers like Müller himself who participated in Russia's exploratory expeditions and who introduced readers to the empire's vast "Asian" holdings east of the Volga. The final chapter investigates its coverage of the natural and applied sciences, fields dominated by Western European scholars.

Gotovtseva opens her analysis by picking apart several longstanding misconceptions concerning the creation of *Ezhemesiachnye sochineniia*. According to the Soviet-era scholar P. N. Berkov, it was Lomonosov who conceived the journal, only to have its editorial reins "seized" by Müller. Like so much else in the imagery of the famed polymath,¹¹ Berkov built his case on flimsy proof, in this case Lomonosov's passing suggestion to I. I. Shuvalov that the Academy begin issuing a European-style monthly.¹² Yet as Gotovtseva demonstrates (p. 28), Lomonosov was already tied up with planning Moscow University and had little interest in editing a new publication. At any rate, as J. L. Black concluded long ago,¹³ all the evidence suggests that the journal was the collective initiative of the Academy's Conference and that Müller was the natural choice to assume the managerial reins given his prior experience editing other Academy publications. Gotovtseva also dismisses the notion of the transference of the Russian-German struggle in the Academy to *Ezhemesiachnye sochineniia*. Again, this myth traces back to Lomonosov, who tended to conflate his own personal animus against Müller with Russia's quest for national greatness on the European stage (p. 33). To his credit, Müller never took the bait. Under his direction, *Ezhemesiachnye sochineniia* became an imperial Russian (*Rossiïsskii*) project that transcended the national origins and affiliations of its contributors.

Chapter Two examines the bitter debates within the journal's literary section against the evolving backdrop of Russia's cultural politics and media environment. *Ezhemesiachnye sochineniia*'s early years coincided with the rivalry in the Academy of Sciences between Trediakovskii and Lomonosov, as well as the rise of the Society of Lovers of the Russian Word, the literary circle led by Sumarokov at the Naval Cadet Corps. While Lomonosov mostly steered clear of *Ezhemesiachnye sochineniia*, he still encouraged his surrogates to attack Trediakovskii in the journal. Meanwhile, Sumarokov and Trediakovskii let their own fights spill on to its pages despite Müller's admonition to desist from "emotional objections to the essays of others."¹⁴ Being the only print media outlet in the mid-1750s worked to *Ezhemesiachnye sochineniia*'s advantage, as it became a lively arena for the titans of Russian poetry to take sides and sharpen their rhetorical knives. They sparred over a wide range of topics—the role of writers in society, the proper training for poets, the virtues of state service, and the qualities of good literature. As the debates unfolded, other writers jumped into the ring, often anonymously, exacerbating the bitter tone of exchanges and prompting

¹¹ On the image of Lomonosov in Russian history and culture, see Steven Usitalo, *The Invention of Mikhail Lomonosov: A Russian National Myth* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2013).

¹² P. N. Berkov, *Istoriia russkoi zhurnalistiki XVIII v.* (Moscow-Leningrad: Akademiia Nauk, 1952), 83-4.

¹³ J. L. Black, *G.-F. Müller and the Imperial Russian Academy* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1986), 125.

¹⁴ "Predovedomlenie," *Ezhemesiachnyiia sochineniia* (January 1755), 6.

Trediakovskii to quit the journal (and the Academy) altogether. By 1758-59, the polemics had exhausted themselves. After Sumarokov and Kheraskov branched out with their own journals, taking their protégés with them, Müller was compelled to use translations from French, German, and English to fill its poetry section.

With the exodus of the poets in the late 1750s, the historical and geographical emphasis in *Ezhemesiachnye sochineniia* became more pronounced. Gotovtseva chronicles these developments in Chapter Three, paying special attention to the journal's provincial correspondents and their relationship with its editor. One of Müller's pastimes was rummaging through the Academy's archive. His efforts led to the discovery and publication of landmark historical, geographical, and ethnographic works. These were all rising academic disciplines, borne out of the Petrine reforms and the state-sponsored expeditions across Eurasia. As a veteran of the Second Kamchatka Expedition, he had an inside knowledge of these ventures and drew heavily from his own Siberian history for publication. In the meantime, he encouraged subscribers in the provinces to submit their own material. Between 1759 and 1762, *Ezhemesiachnye sochineniia* published in serial form two of Petr Rychkov's works, *Orenburg History* and *Orenburg Topography*. In 1763 and 1764, the journal's final two years, the scholar-administrator, Siberian governor, and famed political survivor Fëdor Soimonov was Müller's most reliable contributor, publishing his landmark studies of the Caspian Sea, Siberia, and the Far East.

Gotovtseva taps Müller's voluminous private papers to chronicle the rise of Soimonov and Rychkov in Russian letters. Her analysis confirms the vital importance of patronage and personal relationships for provincial service nobles to enter this rarified world. The academics, poets, and playwrights who formed the core staff of *Ezhemesiachnye sochineniia* in its early years were expected to write and publish. Indeed, their livelihoods were tied directly to their output. By contrast, independent scholars who worked as officials by day and withdrew to their private libraries in the evening were seen as misfits, especially in the mid-eighteenth century when writing as a vocation, let alone a career, remained inconceivable for so many. As Irina Kulakova has shown, journal titles from the 1760s (e.g., *Useful Amusement*, *Leisure Hours*) suggest that most Russians held literary pursuits in low regard.¹⁵ Rychkov's letters to Müller, for instance, chronicle the indignities he experienced regularly at the hands of his colleagues who derided his scholarship as a waste of time and effort.¹⁶ Yet as longtime administrators on Russia's eastern and southern frontiers, he and Soimonov had compelling stories to tell, and it was Müller's task to convert the written record of their service experience into publishable essays. Gotovtseva traces Müller's collaboration with Soimonov over the decades, from their time together in Okhotsk during the Second Kamchatka Expedition to their epistolary friendship in the 1760s. Soimonov produced an impressive body of scientific work over his life, but his service duties, combined with the dearth of publishing opportunities, prevented it from reaching a readership. *Ezhemesiachnye sochineniia* thus enabled him to fashion a new role as a public

¹⁵ Irina Kulakova, "Russia's 'Enlightened Nobility': Forms of Everyday Cultural Self-Presentation (Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries)," *Russian Studies in History*, 48:3 (Winter 2009-2010), 85-6.

¹⁶ See, for example, Rychkov's undated letter to Müller from the end of 1759, reprinted in P. P. Pekarskii, *Zhizn' i literaturnaia perepiska P.I. Rychkova* (St. Petersburg: Akademiia Nauk, 1867), 41.

intellectual, as Müller capitalized on their personal friendship to coax articles out of Soimonov. (pp. 118-21, 136-38).

By contrast, Müller's correspondence with Rychkov underscores the hit-or-miss quality to *Ezhemesiachnye sochineniia*'s editorial process. While combing through the Academy archives, Müller uncovered an unsigned copy of Rychkov's "Conversation Between Two Friends on Commerce." Müller published the piece in 1755 without a byline (and without permission), adding a request to the anonymous author to submit more articles to the journal. Before long, Rychkov found himself in the spotlight as *Ezhemesiachnye sochineniia*'s chief provincial correspondent. Although a career boost for the Orenburg writer, it was also self-defeating for the journal—as Müller later told his readers, Rychkov was supposed to serve as an example to aspiring geographers and historians across Russia, not just a token voice from the frontier (p. 131). His pleas fell on deaf ears. In 1763 and 1764, as Müller scrambled to expand his readers, he appended a "tasks" (*zadachi*) section to each number, inviting readers to weigh in on topics like Russian antiquity, philology, farming, household management, and natural history. The lone submission came from Rychkov himself.

Gotovtseva devotes her closing chapter to *Ezhemesiachnye sochineniia*'s coverage of science and technology. In his efforts to forge a readership with secular leanings, Müller rounded out almost every issue with information on the natural world. As a correspondent with academic connections throughout Europe and Russia, he never lacked material to publish and strived to keep his audience up to speed on advances in every branch of the sciences. *Ezhemesiachnye sochineniia* included landmark works in Russian translation by Linnaeus and Buffon, certainly the most celebrated biologists of the eighteenth century, as well as excerpts from Hans Hirzel, the famed Swiss naturalist who argued for the popularization of scientific discoveries. Keeping with the practical spirit of the age, it featured dozens of pieces on applied sciences: experiments with electricity; meteorological observations; innovations in agriculture and animal husbandry (including potato farming and opium growing); and updates on small-pox treatment and prevention. Müller also waded into contemporary debates on the origins of earthquakes, a contentious subject in the wake of the destruction of Lisbon in 1755. While Russian churchmen like the Moscow bishop Gedeon viewed the catastrophe as divine punishment and a foretaste of the world's end, *Ezhemesiachnye sochineniia* printed an unequivocally naturalistic explanation from the German pastor Georg Wilhelm Wegner. Although Müller instinctively avoided conflict with government and church authorities, his editorial mission was to promote a scientific and secular approach to the natural world. As Gotovtseva argues (p. 168), whether the topic was earthquakes, smallpox, or electric currents, the journal was always set to combat traditional "prejudices" in favor of what she calls the "enlightened worldview."

In its ten-year lifespan, *Ezemesiachnye sochineniia* thus stood at the intersection of multiple crosscurrents in eighteenth-century educated society: the consolidation of European intellectual practices and norms among the Russian elite; the ascent of a national literati, confident in its powers yet reliant on official patronage; and the quiet entrance of provincial writers into the public arena. The journal's appearance also signaled the rise of the printed periodical as a preferred format for elite communication, beaming an aura of

authority, prestige, and utility, to borrow Simon Franklin's terminology.¹⁷ Still, *Ezemesiachnye sochineniia* was by no means the only journal for Russia's self-proclaimed enlightened elite, just as print was not the only discursive medium. In focusing exclusively on Müller and his project, Gotovtseva sometimes loses sight of the social, institutional, and technological contexts in which Russian writers (and readers) operated. To assess its broader significance, *Ezemesiachnye sochineniia* should also be studied in relation to other institutions of enlightenment, such as Moscow University, which also dabbled with its own short-lived periodical in 1762, *Sobranie luchshikh sochinenii* (*Collection of the Best Essays*).¹⁸ Equally important, the journal's disappointing public reception might be better explained by situating it against the tangled landscape of traditional reading and writing practices. Even if Müller's intended readers knew of the journal's existence, they may well have regarded it as indistinguishable from the other items in the barrage of official decrees, manifestos, and government-run newspapers.¹⁹

But these are just minor objections to an otherwise excellent book. The appendix alone measures 170 pages, providing an exhaustive breakdown of each issue, including titles, bibliographic information, authors, translators, and references to the pertinent secondary literature. Given that Müller rarely divulged the identities of his authors—and that much of his material came from English, German, French, and Italian sources—it is a remarkable achievement. The appendix confirms Müller's centrality as editor and contributor, with Sumarokov, Soimonov, Rychkov, and the translators V. I. Lebedev and Andrei Nartov rounding out the top tier of his team. Thanks to Gotovtseva's digging, it is now possible to consult this consolidated source to track citations and establish authorship. If *Ezemesiachnye sochineniia* ever becomes available in digital form (regrettably, it is still not available through *Runivers*), research into the journal and its contributors should become more convenient than ever. Specialists will no doubt regard her book, to paraphrase Müller himself, as a most useful resource for eighteenth-century Russian history and literature.

¹⁷ Franklin, *The Russian Graphosphere*, 242, 247-48.

¹⁸ *Sobranie luchshikh sochinenii k rasprostraneniuiu znaniia i k proizvedeniuiu udovol'stviia ili smieshannaia biblioteka*, 2 vols. (Moscow: Moscow University, 1762).

¹⁹ For a discussion of official printing as a mechanism of state control in the eighteenth century, see Alison K. Smith, "Information and Efficiency: Russian Newspapers, ca. 1700-1850," in Simon Franklin and Katherine Bowers, eds., *Information and Empire: Mechanisms of Communication in Russia, 1600-1850* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2017), 185-94.