

## RUSSIAN CARD GAMES AND THEIR LITERATURE

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### INTRODUCTION

In recent years I have asked many people for information about the spread of card games in Europe, and especially toward Eastern countries. Notwithstanding a few difficulties, I am able to read most of the Germanic and Slavic languages, but most foreign books on card games that I have found are French and English ones. Recently, with the help of Professor A.M.Raffo, I had at last an opportunity of examining several old books dealing with card games in Slav countries. As for Russia, while using them for my study on Tressette and Semerik (*The Playing-Card XXII*, 1994, pp. 71-78), I considered that a second contribution and a more complete report might be useful.

The case of Russia is particularly interesting and represents an important source of information for the history of card games; in particular, this country is more extensive and farther than other Slav countries. The standard of general literature there was very high during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. From this, we learn that card games were widely played. Moreover, some histories of games inform us that Russian variants could have represented a transitional stage between whist and bridge.

Russian games have attracted the attention of several experts, who considered that they required a high degree of skill. Detailed rules of many typical Russian games are still not fully known, despite descriptions of some which were not late to appear in the West, such as, for instance:

- [J.Spencer SMITH], *Le Whist rendu facile. Suivi... du Boston Russe*. Paris 1851. The part on Russian Boston is near the end, at pp. 356-357.
- VANDERHEID C., *Gründlicher Selbstunterricht zur Erlernung des Jarolasch, oder Russische Whist*. Wien 1869.
- HOFFMANN E., RENNENKAMPFF A. von, *The Laws and Principles of Vint*. London 1900. Preference entered the repertoire of players living in Central and Northern Europe, from Austria to Sweden, and a book about it even appeared in the United States,
- LINDERFELT K.A., *The Game of Preference or Swedisch Whist*. Milwaukee 1885.

What about the corresponding books published in Russia? In 1989, I wrote directly (in English, probably easier to understand than my Russian, and certainly much easier for me to write) to the huge Lenin library in Moscow. I made this attempt with very small hope of receiving a response, especially after several other enquires elsewhere remained unanswered, including a few to IPCS experts. On the contrary, I obtained a letter from Russia in reply. The director of the bibliographic service communicated to me first, a reference to three handbooks and a booklet, published in Russia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; second, the impossibility of distinguishing the games of certain Russian origin among those described, and third, her inability to trace any recent publication on the topic.

### A PRELIMINARY LIST OF RUSSIAN BOOKS ON CARD GAMES

The production both of books dealing with games in general and of booklets devoted to a single game gradually increased during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, reaching a remarkable number of works toward its end. The places of publication were St Petersburg and Moscow. If a distinction between them can be drawn, one might say (following Bakhirev) that, predominantly from Moscow came a number of poor editions, badly compiled and with rules gathered everywhere without any critical approach. I will list what I have found up till now, conforming as far as I could, to the current English phonetic usage in rendering the Cyrillic alphabet, although I encountered difficulties, as employing “y” in so many different cases.

Among the “complete” books, we have at least to consider:

- [S.U.] *Noveyshy russky kartochny igrok, ili polnoe i yasnoe opisanie upotreblyaemykh v luchshikh obshchestvakh Ruskikh narodnykh i voobshche vsekh zabavnykh igr v karty*,... S.Peterburg:Shnor, 1809. Part I, 172 p., Part II, 165 p. I have no information of earlier editions, nor of ones immediately following it. Thus, it appears to be an isolated milestone, essential for pin-pointing the development of Russian card-games at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.
- *Igry dlya vsekh vozrastov*. (2 Parts) S.Peterburg. 1844.
- *Schastlivy igrok vo vse kartochnya igry*. Moskva. c.1870.
- *Teorya i praktika, entsiklopedya kartochnoy igry*. Moskva. c.1870. (The last three items are quoted by Bakhirev, as examples of poor editions on the topic.)
- *Polnyi samouchitel'*. Moskva. 1872 (Only thus indicated in Horr's bibliography.)
- BAKHIREV V., *Russky kartochny igrok. Polnoe i yasnoe izlozhenie pravil kak vsekh noveyshikh, tak i prezhnikh upotrebitel'neyshikh v nastoyashchee vremya kartochnykh igr. V 4-kh otdelakh. Izdanie 2-e ispravlennoe*. S.Peterburg, 1880, 206 p. (The 1st edition could not be much earlier; it probably appeared in the same year.)
- GALAKTIONOV S., *Prakticheskoe rukovodstvo, chtoby pravil'no, verno, so vsemi tonkostyami igrat bez proigrisha v shahmaty, shashki, bil'yard, kegli, loto, triktrak, domino, lapty, kroket i biryulki*. S.Peterburg, 1880, 216 p. (In the exhaustive title, card games are not quoted – it is tentatively inserted here due to its presence in Horr's bibliography.)
- BUSOV V., *Shkola kak igrat' v karty, shashki i shahmaty. Pravila, hody i priemy vsekh kartochnykh igr. S pril. vsekh pravila billiardnoy igry*. Moskva, 1886. 256 p.
- SHEVLYAKOVSKY M., *Kommercheskya igry: vint, bezik, whist, preferans, piket, mushka, stukolka, macao, baccara, rams, pol'sky banchek, semerik, shest'desyatshest', konchinka, gorka, trinadtsat i dr. Prakticheskya sovery, zakony i pravila. S prilozheniem "Kartochnoy terminologii"*. S.Peterburg 1890, 221 p.

Alongside previous books, small booklets were published, devoted to a single game or to specific aspects of card play, as those listed in the following:

- *Pravila shakhmatnoy igry i moskovskogo bostona bez remisov*. Moskva: Univ.tip. 1828, 39 p. (10 chapters, the last about boston).
- *Polnaya igra Bostona*. 2nd ed. S.Peterburg, 1830.
- *Igra v wist. Sobranie zakonov, pravil i postanovleny*,... Transl. B.K.E.Somoyurov. S.Peterburg. 1840.
- *Igra v preferans. Sobranie pravil i postanovleny*,... Izd. V.Polyakov. S.Peterburg, 1842 (2nd ed., 1844).
- *Whist en Provence. Quelques préceptes sur le whist*. Sebastopol, 1856.
- *Preferans - Loto. Znachenie i pravila igry*. Moskva, 1857.
- *Pravila igr v karty na osnovanii logaritmicheskikh vychisleny*. c.1870.
- *Tablitsa igry vint-whist*. S.Peterburg, 1877.
- *Whist*. S.Peterburg. 1878 (Translated from Clay edition, after Bakhirev).
- *Vint i ego pravila*. S.Peterburg, 1880.
- *Vint*. Moskva, 1881.
- PLEMYANNIK, *Tetka. Novaya kartochnaya igra*. S.Peterburg, 1889, 32p. (Indicated by the Moscow library.)
- KOKHLEARIVS H., *Sibirsky whist-preferans vint*. S.Peterburg, 1890.

It will be seen that games inducing people to publish booklets of rules were the international ones as Boston and Whist, together with Preference, the typical East-European game, and Vint, the new star of Russian games. Probably, a number of further editions and reprints have been published.

Unlike some other countries, Russia has a very poor literature on card games in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I could find practically no reference to such books, except for very recent ones. That is mainly explained by the attitude to card games which prevailed after the Soviet revolution. The government

was more inclined to develop the technical aspects of competitive games, such as chess and draughts in particular. As an indication we can read what *Bol'shaya Sovetskaya Entsiklopedya* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) has to tell us in 1953 on the subject, "At present, card playing as a way to make money for keepers of gambling-houses and card-sharpers is widespread only in capitalistic countries".

I suppose that several old traditions of playing popular card games have been preserved here and there in the immense territory of Russia and that new games have been evolved in the meantime, but I have no direct information about them. Some typical Russian games have recently attracted the attention of IPCS experts and their rules have been published in the West. One thus has to compare the old descriptions to those arriving from present-day Russia, after almost a century of black-out.

I hope in the next few years to enlarge the previous list – and to have the opportunity to examine most of these books. So far, I have been able to examine only one book from the beginning and two from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This information may serve as a first step in reconstructing our knowledge as to which games were played in Russia. In particular, the three books examined appear to represent a notable proportion of the whole Russian specialist literature. The tables of contents themselves – see transcript in the Appendix – may provide useful first indications on which games are described, in which order and at which length.

## **THE IGROK OF 1809**

The *Noveyshy russky kartochny igrok* published in St Petersburg is more detailed than usual books dealing with rules of games. It may be compared in this respect, and also for its style, with the most exhaustive French and German compilations. For each game, we are provided with a series of numbered chapters, in several sections, mainly devoted to rules of the game and advice on how to play.

The games are dealt with in the order indicated in the Appendix. It may be noted that the first part of the treatise is devoted to five games only. Moreover, the first three are certainly of foreign origin, and were at the time the most commonly played, at an international level, all over Europe. The second part treats of a further 25 games and has page numbers starting again at p.1. A dictionary of technical terms used by players, with reference to volume and page of the work where the term is used, occupies pp. 166-176

The whole work appears to be a mixture of verbatim transcriptions from current international handbooks of games, and especially French *Académies*, together with some original description of popular Russian games. As might be expected, the book appears to be particularly addressed to the upper classes, more inclined to follow French fashions than current habits of the common Russian people. Nevertheless, the most important among traditional games are also dealt with, probably for the first time in print.

## **BAKHIREV'S BOOK**

Bakhirev's book, of 1880, is a "complete" book with all the features we are looking for, in order that we may pin-point the spread of games played in Russia at given times.

Unlike most books of rules of games – in any country – which are simply compilations copied from previous collections and seldom updated, this particular book appears to be an original one, at least if one accepts the statements of its author. In the introduction, he describes the conditions of his life, namely that he lost the use of his legs 35 years before, so that card-playing on every evening was for him more a necessity than a pastime. So, we can rely on this author, since such information is seldom copied to a plagiarised reprint or translation! He has undertaken some original research; he has asked players for confirmation; he is personally involved in much of what he is writing; and again and again he has tested the rules of the games he is describing.

The author begins with explaining the structure of his work. Contrary to what is contained in many booklets already existing on the topic, this is the result of long practice, with the aim of teaching readers really to play the selected games. His selection has been made from among four branches of card games.

The first section is devoted to so-called games of commerce. These are considered as being distinct from gambling games, since they are not based on sheer chance but require a certain skill. Commerce games are generally played for reasonable stakes and a player knows beforehand how much he might lose. A characteristic of these games – mainly played by the upper middle social classes – is that they rather rapidly evolve or undergo a change of fashion, so that one has often to learn the rules of new games or variants. This part of the book includes only 12 games; three of them (Shest'desyatshest', Sibirsky Vint, Semerik) are explicitly stated to have never before appeared in the specialist Russian literature.

The author apportions even greater merit to himself for having written the second part of his work, on family games. These are popular games, which are said to have been treated in writing for the first time. Moreover, the author tells us that, to report the rules of these games correctly, he has interviewed a few typical habitués, such as servants, sailors, muzhiks, and the like. The games are listed in the Appendix.

The third section has no fewer than 50 Patience games explained, and no doubt the author did not lack time to check all of them more than once. It should be compared with old collections from other countries, in order to verify which can be considered as original Russian Patience games; however, the date may be too late to allow a clear distinction of the actual provenance even for such games.

The fourth and last section is devoted to games of either legerdemain or the puzzle kind, ten items, from p. 199 to 206. On the whole, the book appears to be a complete one on cards, similar to the section devoted to card games in the best *Complete Hoyle* handbooks of their time.

## **SHEVLYAKOVSKY'S BOOK**

The last work to be considered here is that written by Shevlyakovsky, another “complete” treatise, published for the first time in 1890. More than others, this book can be found among general references and there were several reprints up to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and also very recently, bearing witness to its intrinsic and documentary value. However, this “complete” book is apparently less complete than others. In particular one has to bear in mind that the title only mentions “commerce” games. Thus we have here no descriptions of other typical cards games, such as Patience on one hand or family games on the other.

As in previous cases, the contents of the book are reported in the Appendix. It may be interesting to note how the recently developed game of Vint has already reached the top position – its description is the first one in the book and is the most detailed, too.

## **GAMES OF THE FISHING FAMILY**

I will briefly summarise the rules of games belonging to the “fishing” family, as it has been called by Michael Dummett and is now accepted by everybody. Some of these games have been reported in English books as coming from the East, and more precisely from the Slav world. Here, at least three games belong to the family, Tenteret and Babochka described in the *Igrok* of 1809 and Konchinka described by Shevlyakovsky. Each of them has some characteristic feature, which we already know from games played elsewhere. I could find no fishing game among those described by Bakhirev.

**Tenteret.** It is said to have an old French origin, to have been very much played at home, but to be at present almost forgotten. I could find no trace in French sources of this seemingly French name, nor of the game itself. The game is played among 2, 4 to 8 players (but the best game is

considered with 4-6 players) with a 52-card pack. Cards are worth their pip value, with J 11, Q 12 and K 13. Four cards are dealt face up to the table and three to each player (in order one by one – beginning and ending with one face-up card dealt to the table). When the three cards are played, a further three are dealt as long as enough are left: if the remainder is not sufficient to be distributed to everybody, these last cards are added face-up to the table. Cards remaining on the table at the end go to the player who made the last capture. The object of the game is to take more cards than the number of cards in the pack divided by the number of players – each card above is a point won; each card below, a point lost. Scoring and payments occur after each game.

Of this general game, there are three variants described which we may call “covered”, “king”, and “open”, the last seeming the most commonly used. “Covered” is played as old Casino (without calling or building). “Open” means that each player has his captured cards in front of him, with the last winning card placed face-up on top of them, and thus all subject to capture as a whole stock. “King” is the same as “open” with a single covering condition – every king which makes a capture is allowed to cover its stock face-down, thus avoiding further captures to it and underlying cards.

**Babochka.** In this case, the name of the game is simple to understand and its meaning, butterfly, can be related to French Papillon, also used for a game of the family. This is played among three or four players with the 52-card pack. Three cards are dealt one by one to the players and four are placed face-up on the table (seven in case of three players). A chip is placed in the pot by everybody. A player who cannot make a capture must add all his cards to those on the table and pay to the pot as many chips as are the cards he is surrendering. Making a capture with all three cards wins the pot. If this does not occur, cards are dealt again and the stakes increase.

**Konchinka (1).** Said to be very popular in the South of Russia and to be described in print for the first time. If the name has a Russian origin, it should be some unlikely diminutive form of “konchina”, meaning ‘death’. Two to four play with the 52-card pack. Four cards are dealt face-up to the table and in batches of four to the players. If jacks or pairs occur to be dealt to the table, the dealer puts back the second card of the pair or the jack in the middle of the pack. Play proceeds to the left. Cards are taken as in old variants of Casino (with courts captured only by cards of the same rang). Jacks can take all the cards. Cards finally remaining on the table go to the winner of the last cards. “Konchinkas” are the 2 of clubs and the 10 of diamonds, each worth 1 point; the majority of clubs is worth 1 point and of cards 2, so that 5 points are scored in all. The object of the game is to reach 15 points, when counting-out is allowed. Scores are kept after each game by writing the new total instead of the previous one. Payment occurs at the agreed money-to-point rate, paying either for the points below 15 or by a constant amount set apart before each game.

**Konchinka (2).** In this variant (which we could call “Royal”) jacks are considered worth 11, queens 12, kings 13, with jacks having lost their faculty to capture all the cards on the table.

## FINAL COMMENTS

I have provided some information on card games in Russia, during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. My study cannot yet have a systematic character and I hope to find the opportunity to extend my contribution later on. Most of the Russian games described in the above-mentioned literature are of the trick-taking kind. Some indication is also provided about their provenance and popularity, although sometimes hardly credible. Except for a few cases, I could not give here a summary of the game rules. To report the rules of the endless games devised by card players, we would need an acknowledged classification which allows any of them to be described by a single alphanumeric string of a dozen characters. (To devise it appears a hard task, to find the required agreement – even harder.)

In the case of Preference, various tables are provided in the two books of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century for different ways of scoring. This game is often said to have no strict rules of playing nor of counting points. Such being the case, it may be surprising to find that it is, in fact, to this game that there has

been devoted one of the few books dealing with card games at a level of undergraduate mathematics (D.M.Cvetkovich, *Zanimljiva matematika. Preferans*. Beograd, 1975 and 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1986).

A comment is required on any Russian provenance of Bridge, since the well-known leaflet *Biritch, or Russian Whist*, (London) 1886, has originated many discussions whether a suitable Russian root exists for Biritch. The mentioned Russian books, both of 1880 and 1890, do not have any explicit mention of new games strictly connected with the Bridge outburst that was occurring in London during the same years. It is known that several original game variants of the Whist family, as Russian Boston, Preference, Yeralash, Vint, had been developed in Russia. In the books mentioned, they are considered, however, either as foreign games or recent variants – we can exclude the fact that an old traditional Russian game belonged to this family. In particular, Vint is explicitly stated both by Bakhirev and Shevlyakovsky to be a recent development arising – in about 1875 – from a mixture of Whist and Preference. In countries outside, it was considered the national game of Russia before the end of the century (for instance in the fundamental handbook by R.F.Forster). Here, it is considered as evolving in Siberia but its main characteristics as coming from – England!

If most of the Russian games of the Whist family indeed have something in common with Bridge, that can rather be found in selecting the trump suit and in bidding the tricks to be taken; the similarity is with Auction-Bridge rather than with the original Bridge-Whist. The fashion of playing a game of the kind of Dummy-Whist (practically played until then only in the absence of the fourth player) had its large initial spread in Paris with Mort, some years earlier than in London with Bridge. In so far as playing with the dummy may be considered an essential feature of Bridge-Whist, the contribution of Paris to the initial history of Bridge should be revalued.

After my contribution was finished – and revised by Michael Dummett and George Beal – I had the opportunity to check an interesting work, among those quoted above, *Igry dlya vsekh vozrastov*, S.Peterburg, 1844. It is a comprehensive treatise, in two volumes, devoted to parlour games. It shows a high degree of internationalism, the games being of various origin, especially French, German and English, in addition to Russian. Unfortunately, this work does not deal with card games. Our regret mainly derives from its date – without it, we abruptly jump from the book of 1809, described above, to the 1870s and 1880s. A complete handbook with the rules of Russian card games near the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century would have been very useful to pin-point their development. Let me add the personal regret that Sylvia Mann will not read the final version of this contribution, which she had encouraged.

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(of Russian complete handbooks of card games described in the text.)

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### 2 – BAKHIREV'S BOOK

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