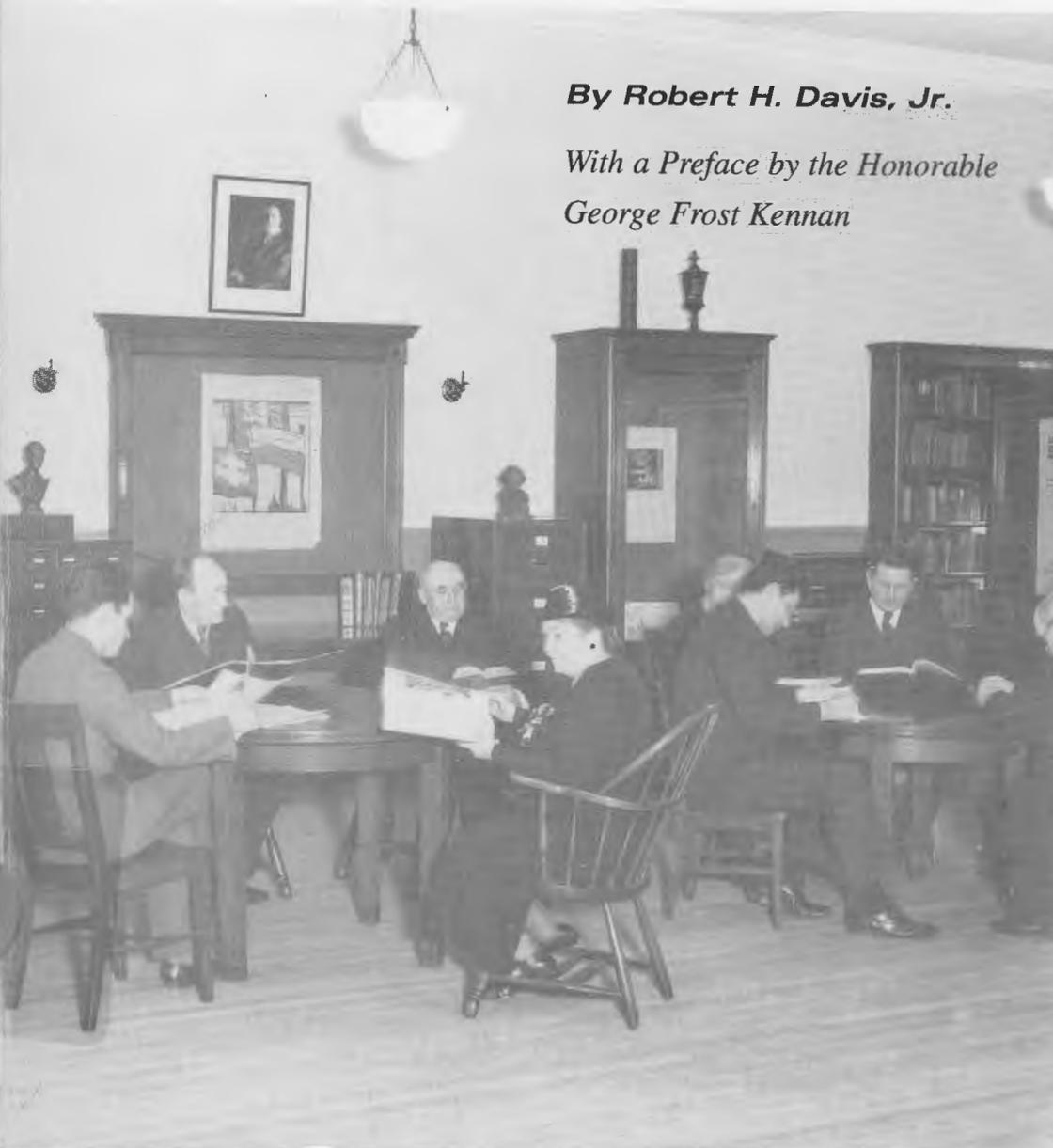


Slavic and Baltic Library Resources
at The New York Public Library:

A FIRST HISTORY AND PRACTICAL GUIDE

By Robert H. Davis, Jr.

*With a Preface by the Honorable
George Frost Kennan*



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Introduction

In 1995, The New York Public Library (NYPL) celebrates a centennial of service. Established on the democratic principle of free and open access, the Library exists for the enlightenment and practical use of an international audience. Although far younger than many of this nation's academic and major public libraries, by both quantitative, and qualitative measures NYPL's collections are among the world's greatest.

Very early in its history, the NYPL sought to create ethnically and linguistically diverse collections. The Library eagerly acquired printed, manuscript, and ephemeral materials from every corner of the globe, building upon the substantial non-West European components of its two private parent collections, the Lenox and Astor Libraries. Beyond any intellectual motivation for catholicity in collecting, the NYPL's location in the most international of American cities required it to meet the needs of an ethnically varied readership. The Library's ongoing success in building and maintaining great collections relating to non-West European peoples and cultures is reflected in the pages of this work. Readers representing the many audiences served by the NYPL—librarians, bibliographers, and the academic, émigré, business, and professional communities—are here provided with an appreciation of the institution's rich history and traditions, and a practical introduction to their variety, organization, and accessibility.¹

The "First History" presented here grew from a five-page memorandum prepared by Dr. Viktor Koressaar in 1982. This in turn served as the basis for a fact-sheet distributed to readers in the Slavic and Baltic Division's Reference Room. Some ten years ago, the Division began to gather and organize fragments of its history, initially in a relatively unsystematic manner. Relevant articles, books, newspaper clippings, press releases, and reams of internal memoranda were collected from many sources. As the NYPL began to organize its own institutional archives, documentation from the Division's pre-history emerged as well. NYPL *Annual Reports* were reviewed in both manuscript and printed versions, and personal interviews were conducted with long-time staff members.² Citations to the literature pertaining to the

1. As a caveat, this entire study has largely excluded from consideration materials pertaining to the non-Slavic countries of Albania, Hungary, Romania, and Estonia. These areas have traditionally been linguistically and administratively outside the responsibility of the Slavic and Baltic Division, which is the primary—but not exclusive—focus of this work.

2. The Annual Reports of the Slavic and Baltic Division from 1898 to 1984 have been reproduced, bound, and cataloged as *History and Reports of the Slavonic Division, NYPL* (New York: The Library, 1986), with the classmark Slav. Reserve 87-1693. The NYPL Archives is a tremendous resource for the study of area studies collection development, since the Library has long maintained contacts with institutions and persons involved in the book trade, the publishing industry, and libraries around the world. In addition, the records of individual

history of Slavic and East European studies in North America were ferreted out, and examined. Pertinent existing studies of the history of libraries, librarians, and area studies were also carefully sifted for relevant information.³

The important collection-building role of New York's émigré communities, expressed through donations, and by the provision of highly talented staff members, is one of the recurrent themes of this history. Generational change, and assimilation by successive ethnic groups has benefited the NYPL through bequests of both individual items and entire collections, often of great importance to scholarship. In turn, the NYPL has offered free access to research materials that, for political reasons, were unavailable in the homelands, and, through its circulating branch libraries, assisted in the initial acculturation and education of these same ethnic communities.⁴

The NYPL, the Library of Congress, the Harvard University Libraries, and a handful of other institutions played a critical part in the emergence of Slavic and Baltic studies, and this is another common theme of this work. It is significant that some of the great collection-builders of the pre-World War II period—Harvard's Archibald Cary Coolidge, the Hoover Institution's Frank Alfred Golder, Berkeley's Robert Joseph Kerner, Columbia's John Dyneley Prince, and NYPL's Avrahm Tsalevich Yarmolinsky—were pioneers in the field of Slavic studies as well. These scholar-librarians well understood the essential synergism between the creation of academic programs and the availability of research collections capable of sustaining them. The compact nature of the field, in the decades before the Cold War generated a surge of area studies interest, is apparent in the common contacts and shared

branch libraries, a number of which were situated in the midst of large Slavic and East European ethnic communities, also offer grist for immigration history and area studies researchers. Over the past decade, the Slavic and Baltic Division has photocopied files of relevant Library documents obtained from the NYPL Archives, many of which are incorporated in the history presented below. It should be noted that all internal Library archival files are closed for a period of twenty years following the date of their creation.

3. The development of non-Western-language collections in the United States, and their relationship to the expansion of area studies scholarship, remains underinvestigated as an area of historical inquiry. Charles Berlin has noted that whereas American university libraries have held Hebrewaica since the seventeenth century, "astonishingly little information is available on the present status of Judaica collections in the United States ... there is virtually no literature on the post-World War II growth and development of academic Judaica collections" (*Library Resources for Jewish Studies in the United States* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Library, 1975], pp. 5-6). For an interesting compendium of articles on the subject, see *Area Studies and the Library. The Thirtieth Annual Conference of the Graduate Library School May 20-22, 1965* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, [1966]), particularly the essay by Eleanor Buist, at that time the Slavic bibliographer at Columbia University.

4. The Slavic and Baltic Division's more than 1.5 million on-site readers have included leading academics, literati, politicians, artists, and professionals. During the 1960-1961 fiscal year alone, the Division's 28,842 on-site readers included Alexander Kerensky, Vladimir Nabokov, Gleb Struve, and George F. Kennan; both Igor Stravinsky and the sculptor Jacques Lipchitz submitted written inquiries (*Annual Report for 1960-1961*, p. [4]).

collection-development practices of these libraries, in a period long before a large academic audience existed.

This last point suggests yet another thread that runs through the narrative, namely, the importance of broader institutional support for success. For example, both the Slavic and Baltic Division, and the Slavic collections of the Library of Congress, have experienced periods in which administrations proved unable, or unwilling to commit financial and human resources sufficient to maintain their uninterrupted growth and accessibility. While this is an obvious point, it suggests the perpetual fragility of vernacular-language area studies collections in the United States, which throughout their history have required either enlightened leadership, or a perceived threat to national security to grow and thrive.

At base, this work has remained true to its modest original intent; namely, to serve as a first history of the development of NYPL's Slavic and Baltic collections. It is "a contribution to the literature," to use the subtitle of *Collectors and Collections of Slavica at Stanford University* (Stanford: Stanford University Libraries, 1985), not a definitive study. Indeed, when scattered data were pulled together into a narrative, issues emerged that transcended questions of library history alone. Unexpected connections between individuals and organizations appeared that had been obscured or overlooked before. Questions relating to the sociology of readers, donors, and staff will require much additional research.⁵ The personal biographies of past Slavic and Baltic Division chiefs—which appear only as brief footnotes in the present work—certainly deserve more attention. Their life experiences, contacts, and world view exerted an impact on both their efforts on behalf of the NYPL, and on their varied activities outside the Library as well. A more detailed picture of material and intellectual exchanges among institutions should be pieced together based on the archives of libraries in both the United States and abroad. The recent publication of source materials connected with such influential scholar-librarians and bibliographers as Lydenberg, Coolidge, Golder, and Babine has certainly enriched our knowledge of the developmental histories of several great American repositories of Slavic, Baltic, and East European book and archival materials. Nevertheless, a more detailed, well-rounded history of how and why such prominent collections came into existence, grew, and flourished remains to be compiled. It is hoped that this study will act as a catalyst for further research on many fronts, resulting in a more complete picture of the history of

5. A number of Division staff members have exerted a lasting impact on the field of Slavic and Baltic studies through their work on behalf of the collections, and through their publications and advocacy. They include Dr. Richard C. Lewanski, Alexis and Tatiana Ramit, Roman Malanchuk (who often wrote under the pseudonym "Vadym Stelmashenko"), and Zora Zaya Kipel, to name but a few.

Slavic-, Baltic-, and East European-language collections and the development of area studies' programs in the United States.

The "Practical Guide" and Appendixes provide an overview of collections, access tools, and services that should prove helpful to both first-time, and more experienced NYPL readers. Particularly useful are the many bibliographic citations found in both the narrative and Appendix I, which represent a digest of past literature on the NYPL's Slavic and Baltic collections. As a survey of a great and immensely complex collection, however, the present work can only suggest to the reader the diversity of resources available. A fuller appreciation requires a careful, well-structured, hands-on bibliographic search of the various printed and electronic catalogs described herein.

The venerable Slavic and Baltic collections of the NYPL have served as a vital resource for generations of students, academics, professionals, artists, and the general public. The staff of the Slavic and Baltic Division will strive to preserve the best of its traditions, while participating in the work of an institution committed to meeting the dynamic, ever-changing needs of its local, national, and international readership.

* * *

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A Note on Transliteration

Personal and geographical names have been transliterated according to the modified Library of Congress system, and modernized to reflect current orthography (e.g., Vestnik, not Viestnik). Spellings of both personal and place names reflect the forms presently found in the on-line Library of Congress name authority file (e.g., L'viv, not Lwów or L'vov; Ostroh, not Ostrog or Ostrih; Tolstoy, not Tolstoi; Mayakovsky, not Maiakovskii), when available. Earlier forms of geographical names (e.g., Khar'kov for Kharkiv) are provided in brackets at their initial occurrence.

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New York City
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