

## Stepennaya Kniga: a step to the origins

In 2007-2008 the two volumes of “The Book of Degrees of the Tsar Genealogy” (“Stepennaya kniga tsarskogo rodosloviya”)—the first summarizing work on the Russian history written at the time of Ivan the Terrible—were published. The publication presented the results of the long-term work of a group of scholars headed by Academician N.N. Pokrovskiy (Institute of History SB RAS, Novosibirsk) aimed at revealing and studying the old manuscripts containing the text of The Book of Degrees. The most important one was discovered by N.N. Pokrovskiy in Tomsk. The new edition based on the oldest copies grants access to the very origin of creating of the work that has influenced greatly the Russian historical science.

The Book of Degrees of the Tsar Genealogy is the first attempt of summarizing conceptual description of the Russian history made in the time of Ivan IV, in the late 1550s—early 1560s. The idea of this book belonged by the prominent clerical and statesman Metropolitan Macarius of Moscow and of All Russia, and was one of the many persistent attempts to secure the ideology of the national unity after a long period of division. Its authors widely used the traditional genres—chronicles, chronographs, hagiography, legends of the miraculous icons, liturgical texts and documents. However, unlike the chronicles, the history of the motherland was written in accordance with a special plan.

The central idea of *The Book of Degrees* was the thought that the good and integrity of the country are provided by the unity of the House of Rurik who rule by the blessing of the Church and by the moral laws of Christianity. The composition of the monument is based on the metaphor of a stair with golden steps leading to God by way of perfection, popular in the Christian Middle Age. All events in *The Book of Degrees* are described not by the years, but by the steps, from I to XVII, in accordance with the rule of this or that monarch from the House of Rurik. The reign of Ivan the Terrible was on the last, XVII step of the “golden stair” of the Russian history.

The idea of harmony of royal and ecclesiastic powers was tested and shaken by the tragic events of the beginning of oprichnina, and the great work was not completed. And still we found about 150 hand-written copies of this huge monument counting up to 1500 pages in its complete form.



The handwritten *Book of Degrees* of the 17th century and its modern edition. Institute of History SB RAS

The majority of the copies were made in 17th century, when the book was copied and supplemented with the latest events.

The Book was first printed in 1775 by G. F. Müller. In 1908–1913 the painstaking and careful scholar P. G. Vasenko published *The Book of Degrees* in the 21st volume of the Complete Russian Chronicles. He based this publication on a copy of the late 16th—early 17th century. Up to recently, it had been the only available edition.

In 1977 in the archives of Tomsk Local History Museum, N. N. Pokrovskiy found a unique copy of *The Book of Degrees*. The water marks (“boars” of two kinds) indicated that the copy was as old as the Book itself: it dated from the 1550s–1560s. The text stopped at the events of 1560–1563 and did not contain any later additions. The margins were covered with notes made with a loose handwriting of the same time, which indicated that the work on the text was continued. These notes were of editing nature and emphasized the main ideas of the book. They widened the genealogy of many Rurik princes, rulers of the principalities that had just recently been independent (Ryazan’, Yaroslavl’, Chernigov, and others), gave more information on the heads of the Russian Church.

The supposition that the Tomsk copy is the oldest one was soon clearly confirmed. It turned out to be of the same time as the earlier known but underestimated Chudov copy (State Historical Museum). Thus, the earliest edition of *The Book of Degrees* has been discovered that kept the signs of the author’s work. The scholars gained access to the “work-shop” of the Old Russian writer. In 2001, the scholar from St. Petersburg A. V. Sirenov added one more copy of that time, the Volkov copy (Russian State Archives of Ancient Acts). A remarkable textological situation has come to light: all the three codexes were lying simultaneously on the *scriptorium* desks, most likely in the Chudov monastery. They were written by the same group of scribes and copyread by the same editor, who brought the author’s idea to life.

The history of creating the monument acquired another look: the Tomsk, Chudov, and Volkov copies contained the earlier (original) versions of the text as compared with the one on which Vasenko’s publication was based. As far back as in 1978 D. S. Likhachev proposed a new edition. But to fulfill the idea it was necessary to carry out enormous work with the huge volumes kept in different archives of the country, as well as to provide financing.

Only after 2000 it became possible to carry out the task, when the possibility of the publication was discussed between N. N. Pokrovskiy and Gail Lenhoff, Professor of the University of California, who had been studying the Lives of Yaroslavl’ Saints in *The Book of Degrees* for many years. She joined the work on commenting the book and provided help from the academic foundations of the New World.

Six huge manuscripts were digitized, and experts from St. Petersburg University, Historical Museum (Moscow), and the Institute of History SB RAS (Novosibirsk) began to study and compare the copies. They worked out the rules of reproducing the text that was printed in the Russian type, considered all notes, corrections, and differences between the copies. Now the work has been completed, and the monument has been published in two volumes.

The publishing of this edition was celebrated with the International Conference “The Book of Degrees of the Tsar Genealogy and the Russian historical consciousness” organized by G. Lenhoff and held in February 2009 in Los Angeles. The leading specialists from Russia, the USA, Great Britain, Germany, and France discussed a wide



A page from the Tomsk copy (middle of 16th century) with revisions dated from the same time. Tomsk Local History Museum

circle of problems of the Russian political history, book and spiritual culture that were reflected in this unique written monument. Publication of the oldest version of *the Book of Degrees* served as new stimuli for solving many disputable problems related to the creation, idea, and ideological-political concept of *The Book of Degrees*.

The academic edition of the monument that was created in the twilight of the Russian Middle Age and influenced the later historical concepts, up to N. M. Karamzin’s works, is of great importance for all who seek to learn the true history of Russia.

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### References

*The Book of Degrees of the Tsar Genealogy by its oldest copies / edited by N. N. Pokrovskiy, G. D. Lenhoff.*—Moscow, Yazyki slavyanskikh kul’tur, 2007.—Volume 1; 2008.—Volume 2.