

Off the Shelf:  
Spasskii's *The Russian Monetary System*  
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Ivan Georgievich Spasskii was one of the most prominent Russian numismatists of the Soviet era and did much to establish the State Hermitage Museum's institutional emphasis on scientific numismatic study (Figure 1). Born in 1904, Spasskii came of age during the initial period of the Communist Revolution, receiving his early education in his hometown of Nizhyn in Ukraine. He continued his studies at Leningrad University in linguistics and in material culture. His interest in numismatics appeared early on, and he conducted some of his first work on coins used in folk jewelry.

The late Russian Imperial period saw the publication of a number of exceptional numismatic works. From the works of Chertkov and Chaudoir in the 1830s to Giel and Tolstoi in the 1880s and 1890s, and perhaps culminating in the multivolume *Монеты Царствования* of Grand Duke Georgii Mikhailovich<sup>1</sup> (still being produced when the war brought the project to an end), Russian numismatic literature of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is unusually rich.

Some numismatic scholars, like Ilyin and Oreshnikov, managed to survive the Revolution, but many others did not. Coin collecting was

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<sup>1</sup> *Monety Tsarstvovaniya* [*Coins of the Emperors*]. The Georgii Mikhailovich corpus is the landmark work in Imperial Russian numismatics. S. G. Gromachevskii has written that it is a "colossal and classic scientific work which has no equal in the Russian or in the entire foreign field of numismatic literature. Especially important for the coverage of monetary history through the inclusion of a vast wealth of hitherto inaccessible documentation. Each volume contains a well-focused summary covering the technical and fiscal aspects of the coinage it deals with, along with succinct, precise descriptions of the coins. A fully developed index in each volume covers persons, coins, subjects, etc. The edition is stunningly deluxe, with paper of the highest quality, elegant typography and superb photographic illustrations of the coins" (translated from Gromachevskii, *Библиографический указатель литературы по русской нумизматике* [Zhitomir, 1904], p. 20).

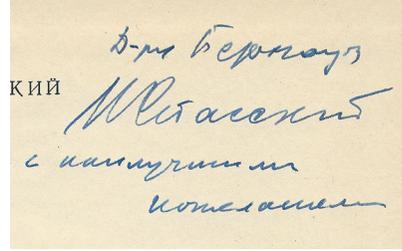


Figure 1. Ivan Georgievich Spasskii, with a signed inscription in his hand.

looked down upon as a bourgeois pastime by the Communist authorities, and many private collections were “nationalized” (i.e., forcibly taken from their owners and integrated into national museum collections). While this created an environment in which traditional coin collecting activities were sharply curtailed, it also created unprecedentedly massive institutional holdings that were continually expanded by state appropriation of hoard finds and the like. These vast institutional collections would become the basis upon which scholars like Spasskii would develop a scientific approach to numismatics that was primarily concerned with studying coins as artifacts of material culture and a means of examining the economic systems of the past. This approach to numismatic study was one that could persist under the Soviet regime and which did in fact flourish during those decades.

Spasskii wrote several books and numerous articles during his career. His published volumes include two on the intriguing jefimki: *Талеры в русском денежном обращении 1654–1659 годов: сводный каталог ефимков*<sup>2</sup> and *Русские ефимки: исследование и каталог*.<sup>3</sup> In 1963, he

<sup>2</sup> Leningrad, 1960.

<sup>3</sup> Novosibirsk, 1988.

published an infrequently seen work on foreign and Russian orders,<sup>4</sup> and the following year wrote a small book on the 1825 pattern ruble of Grand Duke Constantine.<sup>5</sup> In 1970, he published a book in Ukrainian on the numismatics of Ukraine.<sup>6</sup> With E. S. Shchukina, he wrote a bilingual work on the *Medals and Coins of the Age of Peter the Great*.<sup>7</sup>

But it is for his classic work *The Russian Monetary System* (*Русская монетная система*) that Spasskii is best known. First published in Russian in 1957, it is an outstanding overview of Russian numismatic history. Being written by a Soviet scientific numismatist, it reflects perspectives one might expect: Spasskii examines the Russian coinage as aspects of material culture and studies them for what they tell us about economic history and power. At times, the Soviet context in which the book was published is obvious, with some of Spasskii's views on the progress of history reflecting the Marxist emphasis on historical materialism.

The first edition of Spasskii's magnum opus is a slender, modest volume (Figure 2).<sup>8</sup> As with most Soviet publications of the age, the emphasis was on the quality of the research and not on the production of the physical volume: it is printed on cheap paper which browns with age, the photographs are fairly poor, and it is bound in thin boards. But the quality of the scholarship was top-notch, and the 1957 first edition was quickly followed by a second edition in 1960.<sup>9</sup> There appears to be little difference between the two editions, with the format nearly identical. The first edition is somewhat scarce, at least outside Russia, and the second edition may be a bit scarcer.

While the second edition is essentially just a reprinting of the first, a third edition was published in 1962 that was considerably expanded.<sup>10</sup> The volume jumped from a 124-page format to a 224-page format. While the production values of the expanded edition would win no prizes today, they were certainly a step up from the first and second editions.

The third edition clinched the reputation of the title as the standard work on the subject, and set in motion plans to translate it into English. Spasskii's text was translated by Z. I. Gorishina, whose text was

4 *Иностраннные и русские ордена до 1917 года* (Leningrad, 1963).

5 *По следам одной редкой монеты* (Khudojnik, 1964).

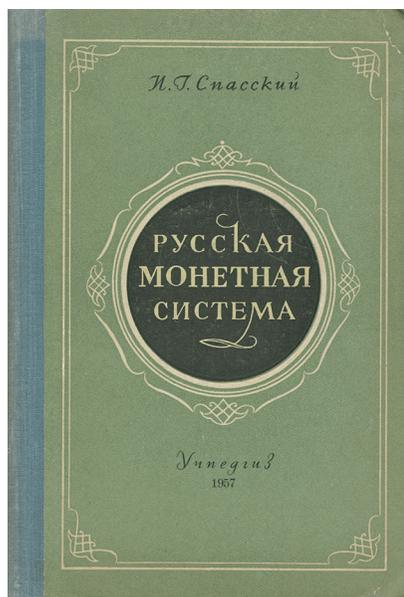
6 *Дукати і дукачі України* (Київ, 1970).

7 *Медали и монеты Петровского времени* (Leningrad, 1974).

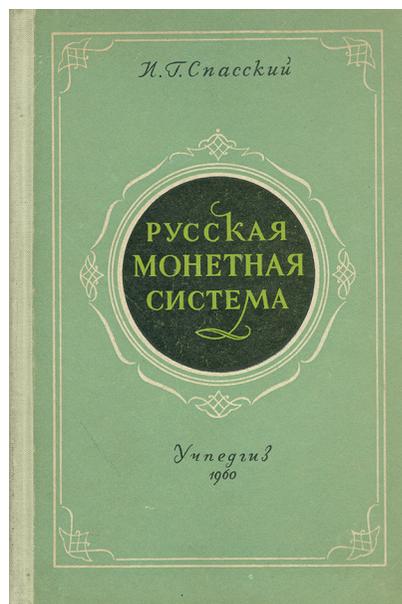
8 *Русская монетная система* (Moscow, 1957).

9 *Русская монетная система* (Moscow, 1960).

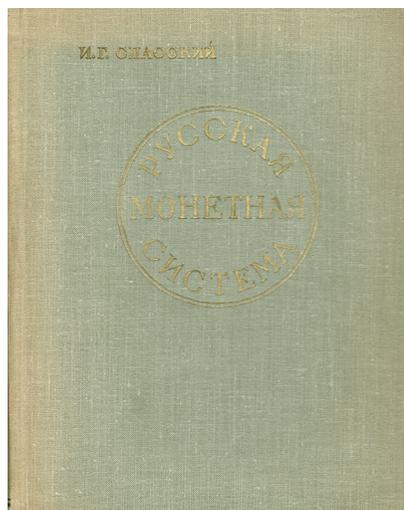
10 *Русская монетная система* (Leningrad, 1962).



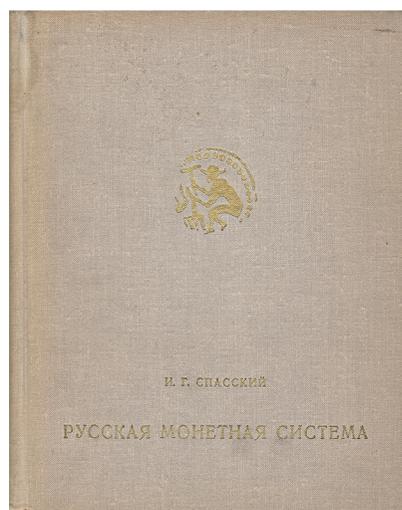
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Figure 2. The four Russian editions of Spasskii's classic text: (a) the 1957 first edition; (b) 1960 second edition; (c) 1962 third edition; (d) 1970 fourth edition.



Figure 3. Translations of *Русская монетная система*: (a) the 1967 English translation; (b) the 1983 German translation.

then edited by Leonard S. Forrer. The result was published in 1967 by the Amsterdam firm of Jacques Schulman.<sup>11</sup> This translation brought Spasskii's work to a much wider audience and helped establish his international reputation (Figure 3). It also helped promote the study and collecting of Russian coins outside of the USSR, there being little available on the subject in English at the time (the works by Severin being the most notable exceptions).

As important as the translation was, it wasn't perfect. It is clumsy in places, and wooden in most. If Forrer (a perfectly good writer) massaged Gorishina's translation to make it more readable, he didn't exactly knock himself out. The final product could have used better editing and possibly a better translator to begin with. These criticisms aside, though, the book's appearance in English was truly important.

While the third edition was a notable expansion of the first two, Spasskii was not finished tinkering with the text, and a fourth Russian

<sup>11</sup> *The Russian Monetary System* (Amsterdam, 1967). The author's name is transliterated as Spassky on this title.

edition was published in 1970.<sup>12</sup> The book was now 256 pages long, and featured some revision and a small amount of new material. This was the final Russian edition. As a coda of sorts, a German translation of this edition was published in 1983, featuring additions through 1981.<sup>13</sup>

Ivan Spasskii died in 1990, living long enough to see the crumbling of the Soviet system in which he had worked during his career in numismatics. The collections at the State Hermitage Museum live on, of course, with over 1.1 million objects in the numismatic department alone. Spasskii was one of the few with the breadth of vision necessary to encompass the enormous span of Russian coinage and write a classic work on the subject.

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<sup>12</sup> *Русская монетная система* (Leningrad, 1970).

<sup>13</sup> *Das russische Münzsystem* (Berlin, 1983). The author's name is transliterated as Iwan Georgewitsch Spasski on this title.