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Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism in Europe

Dal', Vladimir Ivanovič

Author: Noack Christian

Dal', Vladimir Ivanovič

Born as son of physician of Danish origin in the city of Lugansk in the Cossack territories north of the mouth of the Don River, Dal' graduated at the Naval Cadet School of St. Petersburg in 1819 and began to study medicine after some year of naval service at the University of Dorpat (Tartu) in 1826. As a military physician he took part in campaigns against Turkey (1828-29) and Poland (1830-31) before moving into civil service. At his first posting in Orenburg in the Southern Urals he began to collect Russian folkloric material.

A first collection of fairy tales appeared in print in 1832. Dal' moved to St. Petersburg and found friendly reception in the capital's literary scene. Between 1833 and 1839 he published four highly praised volumes of Russian stories and fables, which critics saw as the product of the "native Russian genius, artistically transformed". Dal's *Posloviťy russkogo naroda* (, 1862) encompassed about 30.000 popular sayings.

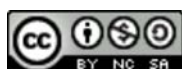
Between 1863 and 1866 Dal' published his opus magnum, the *Tolkovij slovar' živogo Velikorusskago jazyka* ("Explanatory dictionary of the living Great-Russian language"). He himself conceived it as an alternative to the recently completed Russian Academy's *Attempt at a Regional Dictionary of Great Russian* (1852). While the latter listed 18.000 entries, Dal' noted and explained 200.000 Russian words. More importantly, Dal' understood his lexicographic work as an intellectual quest for a renewal of the Russian literary language, a topic intensely discussed since the beginning of the century. Dal' believed that a dictionary should be available for consultation so that for fresh linguistic material could improve the style of Russian writers. Such a renewal needed to be based on the language of the ordinary people (*prostonarodnyj jazyk*) and regional variants (*oblastnye jazyki*), which he felt would enrich, without threatening the integrity of, standard "Great Russian". Seeing his dictionary as an instrument for linguistic improvement rather than preservation, he sought to facilitate its use by deviating from the usual lexicographic structures and inventing what became known as the "alphabet-nest system". Following Herder and Wilhelm von Humboldt, Dal' emphasized the primacy of verbs by using them as headwords, under which were listed all other forms like nouns, adjectives or adverbs that he understood as "derived" from it.

The importance of the dictionary was immediately acknowledged through the award of the Lomonosov Prize of the Academy of Science, of which Dal' also became honorary member. Dal's dictionary was reissued several times and continues to be reprinted, although its nest-system proved not to be user-friendly and was substantially revised for the third (1903-10) and fourth (1912-14) editions.

Word Count: 419

Terras, Victor; 1990. *Handbook of Russian literature* (New Haven: Yale UP)

Vitalich, Kristin; 2007. "Dictionary as empire: Vladimir Dal's "Interpretative dictionary of the Living Great Russian Language"", *Ab Imperio* 7: 153-178.



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