

Thousands of Russian books donated to Miami

After learning that more than 1 million Russian books would be hauled away from a bookstore in Rockville, Md., and burned or pulped as the result of a scheduled eviction from rented warehouse space, Librarian of Congress James Billington marshaled a rescue effort.

Now approximately 18,000 books headed for probable destruction will instead be donated to Miami's libraries, enriching the university's collection of Russian materials.

Karen Dawisha, professor of political science and director of Miami's Havighurst Center for Russian and Post-Soviet Studies, first heard about the books when two friends at the Library of Congress (LOC) called one Saturday morning to say that they were working with Billington to rescue the collection.



Judith Sessions, dean and university librarian, and Karen Dawisha, director of the Havighurst Center, with some of the rescued books now being sorted in Alumni Hall.

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Russian books

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"Billington had been here the previous year to give the first annual Havighurst lecture and obviously had been impressed with the university's commitment to become a major Russian center," Dawisha says.

Nearly 40,000 Soviet-era publications were rescued March 11 by the librarian and a team of LOC staffers. Facing off at dawn as six dump trucks rumbled up to cart off the books from the storage facility, the parties were able to negotiate a deal. The library wanted a large number of the books and time to comb through the shelves to make selections. The bookstore owner, who wanted time to evacuate some of his inventory to another warehouse, agreed to donate books to LOC and to other libraries. The landlord agreed to stay his eviction for three weeks to permit this to happen.

The collection included a large number of multiple copies of titles that some 100 Russian state publishing houses had supplied to the Victor Kamkin bookstore, which had served as a major U.S. outlet for Soviet publishing during the Cold War.

"What's great about this gift is that the LOC has rescued only the best books, has catalogued them for us, boxed them up and shipped them free of charge," Dawisha says. "This is a major addition to our Russia collection, which is outstanding in certain areas of the 19th century, but needs work on the 20th century."

Dean Judith Sessions praised Dawisha for her efforts in the books' rescue.

Miami and Texas A&M are the two universities that will be major beneficiaries, making a significant impact on Miami University libraries' standing in the field.

"As a result of working with the Library of Congress on this acquisition, Miami has been placed on the list to receive future gifts in the Russia area. This way, we will constantly be able to enrich our collection," Dawisha says.