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“The Beginning of the Russian Universities of 18th –19th centuries: Difficulties and adaptive capacities of the idea of University in the unfavorable ground.”

Among the historians who deal with the history of universities, it’s considered almost a bad form to write about the universities “in general” about some values and traditions, characteristic for the history of universities among all the people and in all periods of history, for instance – about the traditions of universities to oppose with power. Such approach is appreciated by professional historians as a tribute to an old “university romanticism”. For a long time they successfully research such a theme as “universities and society”1, which every time supposes a “submersion” in a historical context of a given epoch. It’s important to prove, that an university or universities are very well integrated into a given society of a given period, performing quite a definite functions and having a perfect system of social links. Such approach is very fruitful and quite natural, but the stress is being made on unique character of “university situation” in every given society. It’s a common rule – not to speak about the genealogy of universities otherwise they’ll say that as far back as Marc Bloch warned against “the idle of origins”. To speculate on a certain general “idea of an university” is a destiny of philosophers or a narrow specialists in the sphere of John Newman work.

But in this situation a number of questions appear: has our international Commission on Universities history not only formal and practical basis for meetings, but essential as well? Can an experience of professional medievalist be of any use for a history of universities of XIX-XX cc.? A given report contains an attempt to set an experiment: it’s an attempt of a specialist on medieval universities in France to appreciate a history of universities in Russian Empire.

In spite of the attempts to found an University in Moscow, going back to Dmitri the Impostor (1605), Russian Universities appeared rather late (if not take into consideration the western territories, joined in 18th c.)

Nowadays a hot discussion about the priority in foundation of an University is taking place between the historians of Moscow and Saint-Petersburg. According to tradition the university of Moscow was considered to be the oldest one, but lately the historians of St.-Petersburg, founding on scrupulous researches, have discovered the proofs of the of existence of the University of St.-Petersburg within the limits of the Russian Academy of Sciences, founded in 1724. Their colleagues in Moscow object that the proofs of the University’s existence must be evident for the contemporaries, but with the help of magnifying glass. But all of them do agree that the idea of University in Russia came across a great number of difficulties and developed in unfavorable conditions. The historian of the University of Moscow F. Petrov, pointing to relatively populous Moscow University which hasn’t stopped its activity since the moment of its foundation in 1755, writes: “… Up to the approval by Alexander I the first Statutes of University we can speak only about the conception of University education”.

University reform of Alexander I in 1804 created for Russian universities more favorable conditions, having given them a wide autonomy in Western European manner. Universities of Kharkov and Kazan appeared, old centers of education in Dorpat and Vilno were given a status of Imperial universities; a little bit later an University of Saint-Petersburg was founded on the basis of Pedagogical Institute (1819). But even the researchers who appreciate highly the reform of Alexander I, are compelled to acknowledge that the publication of University statutes was in no way coordinated with a general cultural and political situation in Russia. The problem of University autonomy remained undecided.
The epoch of Nicholas I was less favorable for Universities. During his reign was open the only University in Kiev, instead of the University of Vilno, which was prohibited after the rebellion in Poland of 1830. Course to an attaching of a state institutions character to Russian Universities was fasten in a new University statutes in 1835 and reached its culmination after the European events of 1848. In the “gloomy seven years” of 1848-1854 ridiculously small number of students was shortened (from 4.000 in 1837 down to 3.000 in 1853). Universities were subjected to a small-minded police guardianship and were persecuted; people even said about their complete closing or about re-subjecting to a military department. But this very suspicion towards Universities could be estimated as an indirect evidence of their influence’s growth in a life of society.

The events didn’t make themselves to wait, at the joint of 1850-60 a necessity of University reform was widely being discussed in a public opinion; Russia for the first time came into collision with the unknown phenomenon of the student movement (“University rebellions” of Saint-Petersburg and Moscow, disorders in Kazan, Kiev, Kharkov). University reform of 1863, having been held in the context of other “great reforms” of Alexander II, was approved by the majority of an European experts. New Statutes provided a wide autonomy and other favorable conditions for Universities. The number of students increased greatly; new Universities were opened in Odessa and Warsaw.

University freedoms were shortened by Alexander III in the period of so-called “counter-reforms” including introduction of a new Statutes in 1884. During the reign of this Emperor the only University in Tomsk was opened (1888); broad public insisting on its opening, made ready in the previous reign. This constituted system of Russian universities had a number of faults (not without reason thousands of students preferred to study in the Universities of Germany, Switzerland and France), nevertheless the idea of its stable existence and an ability to self-reproduction was of no doubt spread in the society. Autonomy of Universities was widened during the Revolution of 1905. Very soon new University was founded in Saratov (1909). Under the Minster of Education L. Kasso (1910-1914) the Universities were turned back to the Statutes of 1884, many progressive teachers were dismissed; these events provoked mass protests and student disorders. Only during the War new Universities in Rostov (1915) and in Perm (1916) were founded mainly as a consequence of universities evacuation from western regions.

But let’s go back to the first stage of an University’s appearance in Russia. If the task of “Enlightened Absolutism” was the formation of the University education’s system, then we should recognize that great sums of many were wasted. As a reason of this phenomenon historians put forward the idea about the absence of necessary social and cultural ground for their functioning as well as coolness of Katherine the Great towards Universities in the end of her reign under the influence of the Revolution in France. These both reasons are correct but not sufficient.

Firstly there were not so few innovations, which had got acclimatized in the 18th century Russia rather well: from the very first steps of its development rather a good system of military education in Russia had been forming; highly-technological branches of production were functioning successfully, architecture and other arts didn’t yield to European ones; a refined noble culture was forming. The Government had both money and skilled experts in order to settle successfully the tasks, having been put forward. University leaders orientated themselves to the best West-European examples; Göttingen, Halle, Leiden, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Upsala. The consultants of Katherine the Great on the questions of education in Russia were: Diderot, Grimm, and other encyclopaedists.

Secondly, though Katherine the Great and her successors didn’t satisfactory estimate the results of Revolution in France, she acted in one and the same direction with French
revolutionaries, although not being such consistent. Revolution destroyed all University corporations in France.

In my opinion, the reasons of a relative failure of the Universities’ propagation should be seen, except the other reasons, in underestimation of an University’s phenomenon nature. It’s curious enough, that during his ceremonial speech in Moscow University (1763), a young Russian professor Ivan Tretyakov, having addressed to the conception of Universities in Medieval Western Europe, estimated this problem as the most harmful arrangement, profitable only for clergy. According to him, only interference of the monarchs which took place later on, made this institution useful for a society. Real academic freedom was qualified by the leaders of 18th century as an achievement of Reformation and especially of Enlightenment. Nowadays many scholars are still sure in this thesis, both in Russia and the West.

Any medievalist will be astonished with this misunderstanding. However it’s something more than mere misunderstanding or factual mistake.

The phenomenon of University needs a very special comprehension. It appeared in the period of the High Middle Ages, together with many fundamental European institutions such as parliaments, personal freedom, legal state, etc.... However if there are rather a great number of regions in Europe in which Western values, mentioned above, were teared away or are still being teared away, than Universities exist practically everywhere.

What feature was the main in the Universities from the very beginning of their appearance? It’s clear enough that their task wasn’t concluded only in the development of science, understood as an accumulation of a positive scientific knowledge. But as the center of education as well, formally they were far from being the most “effective” institutions. In the Middle Ages as well as in the Modern Period together with Universities existed more advanced and more available scientific and pedagogical structures – schools of monastic orders, humanitarian academies, town schools, Jesuit colleges, Protestant academies, royal societies, etc. But only Universities had rights to collate the grades, possessing the status “Studium generale”, due to privileges, given by universal powers, Universities could collate “licentia ubique docendi”- the testimony, valuable everywhere in the Christian world. No other institution being even the most advanced, possessed such a possibility. (This difference was clearly recognized by contemporaries.

Authenticity of University and the grades collated by this institution were defined by an academic freedom of corporation. The state powers could force the control over the Universities, but they couldn’t and didn’t want to abolish the principles of electivity of University posts, the freedom of discussion, they hadn’t to intrude in the process of collating the grades. Such was a “gifts of medieval Christianity to the modern world”.

Both in the Middle Ages and nowadays, according to sociologist’s opinion (and particularly, according to Pierre Bourdieu), the grade has the quality of “social magic”, that is to say – the capacity to give to a person a new, relatively high social quality, awarding him with socially recognized symbolic capital. Specific “cultural code” of University, its ethics, self-estimation and ambitions gave him a high position in the society equalizing knighthood and academic degree.

In the 18th century the best Universities of Europe could be the centers of science in a modern comprehension to play the role of true centers of Enlightenment. But it was only the top of iceberg: the majority of other European universities were far from perfection from the point of view of scientific and pedagogical level. But it didn’t reduce their attractiveness, because the universities were expected to collate the grades from.
The great Russian scholar of 18th c. M. Lomonosov who studied in the Universities of Germany himself, demonstrated a deep comprehension of this institution’s essence. In the mid of 50-s of 18th c. he defined the main conditions of fruitful life of a Russian University:
- academic freedom: the self- government of the University based on reliable privileges; the right of an University corporation to collate the grades
- including of the possessors of university graduates and university professors in the Table of Ranks, the acknowledgement of equality of university and noble state.

But nothing of this was realized in the 18th century. Why the “Enlightened Absolutism” didn’t meet those simple demands? Paradoxically, but the ideology of Enlightenment itself didn’t give a possibility to penetrate into the nature of the phenomenon of University. Knowledge was estimated very highly by that intellectual age. But it was only useful knowledge, directly serving the state and public wealth. In this connection it’s quite characteristic that everywhere, including Russia, the most popular among intellectuals and administrative persons, was John Lock with his utilitarian concept of education. Katherine Dashkova, retinue of Katherine the Great and the President of the Academy of Sciences, was an admirer of John Lock and of utilitarian Edinburgh school.

It’s not surprisingly that the idea of independent privileged corporation didn’t provoke sympathy either from empresses or from their intellectual experts.

About the fact of impeding of the process of university milieu’s forming in Russia from the side of the utilitarian approach of the state, the examples from the history of Moscow University testify. There were relatively few students here; they were spent by the state great sums of money. But only two of its 300 students, having entered the University during the period of the 1755-1770, have managed to listen to complete course. The others either left the University themselves or were mobilized for a state service according to governmental orders.

In addition to this fact it’s necessary to take into consideration a very low attractiveness of University education for the noble men as well as the absence of traditions and possibilities of its obtaining for other estates. The students were forcedly driven in the university; for example in the university of the academy of St-Petersburg they were really punished with the sticks. The Linguistic gap between foreign (in general – German) professors and native audience also was a reason of a number of difficulties.

Nevertheless, the phenomenon of University took deep roots, in spite of greatest difficulties. The reasons of this process was concluded in a virulence of University.

University culture, formed in the Middle Ages, possessed an internal logic capable to reveal itself in relative independence from outer circumstances and from dominating ideology. In other words, if at least the main elements of University system were outlined, a definite “force of things” showing to the university public definite decision and actions, began to act.

This rather spontaneous manifestation of University culture’s features in Russia is especially didactic. Russian University of 18th century didn’t possess at least small autonomy.

But an embryo of University corporation appeared spontaneously – the conference of professors, which could act in spite of the will of powerful administrators: directors and curators who were ruling the University. However, both professors and directors were unanimous in their attempts to keep the students, who were constantly turned off for a state’s necessities, in the attempts to give them a possibility to listen to complete courses and continue their education. The powers didn’t give a University in Russia any right to collate the grades, but the University milieu took such attempts quite independently (such an initiative activity was extremely rare in Russia). Some persons acted in such a way due to the strength of habits, having accepted during their own experience in the universities abroad; some persons acted according to professional skill, which had been accepted during the long stay in the University of Moscow, subjecting to University culture’s logic.
It's necessary to note, that freemasonry in Moscow has flourished on the university ground. It was caused by a number of reasons. However, it's quite clear for a medievalist, that a university milieu always and everywhere is apt to heterodox doctrines from of Wiclef and Huss to iansenists and pietists. Besides, this quality expressed the necessity of students and magisters to feel themselves a kind of chosen minority, devoted adepts, standing in contradiction to social environment, but holding the Light of true learning as well.

>From the period of the Middle Ages University culture distinguished itself with deep discrepancy. Perhaps, those contradictions were the very factors to ensure its unique stability and adaptive capacity, aspiration for freedom, struggle for autonomy, desire to mark its own identity coexisted with a constant extraversion, with volition to enlighten the public, to popularize a “high science”, to interpret the mystery of knowledge in vernacular language. The University of Moscow, hardly having constituted and having not properly developed the system of its corporations began actively perform this mission.

In this way University culture, going back to 13th c. Combined both confidence in a unique status of knowledge, in a special character of its nobleness based on a grades’ system and pretensions on quite a traditional nobleness, on noble rank. In the 18th century Russia education still didn’t give any definite rank, it wasn’t considered to be a factor of ennobling. But anyway the students of Academy in Saint-Petersburg asked permission to have not only money allowances, but court swords as well. School-leaving pupil of “ignoble origin” who studied in a high-school attached to the University of Moscow since 1757 were given court swords as a symbol of noble rank. University cleans class distinctions, knowledge ennobles – that’s the oldest postulate of university culture which was in contradiction with the rules of Russian Empire.

In Russian University of 18th c. Some other characteristic features of University culture revealed themselves evidently, as well as its main contradictions. For instance, it was a combination of administrative and territorial isolation from the surrounding environment with multicanal vital connection between University and town with aspiration for publicity and popularization of science. Availability of own University values and confidence in ennobling role of knowledge got along together with desire to incorporate in the “Table of Ranks”, hierarchy. Russian University as Universities of Western Europe appeared to be closely connected with publishing of books. It’s hardly possible to overestimate the role of Novikov’s “University Printing house” in Moscow in the development of Russian culture. But there was also a characteristic feature of the period: rather spontaneously the University leaders began to have a claim on censor’s functions. This is a feature of Western European Universities, which had its roots in a high self-estimation of Universities, in their pretensions on universal character of their knowledge.

Step by step a special milieu had been forming in the University, which demonstrates clear distinctions from surrounding world. For instance, semi-official newspaper “Moscow Records” didn’t leave room to anything private. The only exclusion were the news from the private life of university professors. It’s not surprising that the very University culture could put a person in a situation, inconceivable from the point of view of the Russian Empire’s “spirit of Law”. For example, in 1794 young doctor Nevzorov, had been made answerable for taking part in mason Lodge, proclaimed during the inquest: “I belong to the University and according to its Statutes I must answer in no way as in the presence of the University’s deputy”. The most astonishing feature was that because of its proclamation he had managed to avoid persecutions.

In a half a century of its existence University of Moscow already possessed a cultural milieu which gave rise to a number of persons – the authors of university reform. In 1802 M. Muraviov, the pupil of Moscow University, made up “A critical Inscription of the Moscow
University’s needs” which to a considerable extent became a basic for the University Reform of Alexander I . As a vice-minister of education and a guardian of Moscow educational district, Muraviov took a possibility to realize his ideas. In a new Statutes the principle of University autonomy was successively maintained. All University posts , including the post of rector were elective. All important functions , including collating of grades, ruling over the University and over its vast educational district, carrying out censorial functions in its district were placed on University Council. Educational district was directed by its guardian, appointed by the tsar, but when it was necessary, a rector could act apart from the guardian. In Muraviov’s other authors of University reform’s opinions “aspirations of professors mustn’t be limited by the university’s tasks, but should be stretched for the whole state”. The university milieu take an active part in the many scientific societies’ activity : “ Society of Tasters of Nature”, “Free Economic Society”, “Society of amateurs of Russian Antiquities”.

University reform in Russia turned astonishingly to be consonant to a German romantic renaissance of the idea of University , the most fully represented by titanic figure of Wilhelm von Humboldt . However, it’s possible to speak not so much of direct reception of his ideals, but in particular of general ideas of that period’s adaptation , taken mainly from Göttingen. Muraviov, the pupil of Moscow university was perfectly integrated in European University space, he was an honorable member of the University of Leipzig, close friend of Christopher Meyners from Göttingen, famous theorist and historian of University education. However, besides Muraviov there were many other Moscow university professors, connected with Göttingen, who had occasion to put into practice the reform of university. In Moscow it was by no means an aspiration to superficial imitation of University practice’s rules, but – an inherent product of University culture , having taken deep roots on the Russian ground. The typical representatives of this generation were the first three rectors: 1. K. Tchebotarev, N. Strachov, Th. Bause, whose biographies were closely connected with Moscow University.

It’s evident for any medievalist, that the ideas of “University romanticism» both of Germany and of Russia , were in accordance with the notions of medieval university thinkers like Jean Gerson.

The historians usually point out that Russian universities having closely come in their Statutes to the European universities, hung posed in mid air, not corresponding either local social political conditions, or general aims of powers. It had as a consequence inevitable collapse of University reform and revision of university Statutes. Really, as a rule, the Statutes were not kept strictly; a rector and University council had no either possibilities or desire to withstand to the guardian. University of Kazan and the University of Saint-Petersburg, which had just been created (or recreated, as the historians of St.-Petersburg try to prove) were crushed as long ago as under Alexander I’s reign by the guardians M. Magnitsky and D.Runitch . The last proclaimed the root of all evil in the process of coping out by the Statutes of “inadmissible gothic forms”. However a lot depended on traditions. The Magnitsky’s attack on the Kazan University was in a certain degree justified – high role of University, described by the statutes coordinated badly with a miserable University reality. But it’s characteristic, that the first guardian here was Rumovsky, an educative person, who, however, was far from the University tradition; he ruled the University of Kazan as classic School. At that very period the university of Kharkov had far more, viability, being directed by D. Karazin who had been formed as administration according to Moscow University’s tradition.

The University of Moscow managed to use the results of the Alexander I’s reform better in comparison with other institutions; for the reform was counted upon the stable university milieu and traditions of university culture’s existence. That’s why Moscow University turned to be stable to the persecutions of the Nicholas I reign, having put into
existence a number of original thinkers of 30-s of the 19th c., who played a role of national identity's holders, traditional for university culture.

They say, that Nicholas I defined the university of Moscow as a “Den of Wolfs”; and going along the Moscow University’s buildings, knitted his brows and was in a bad mood for a whole day. He had reasons for that: not so much the ideas, but the spirit of the University was in contradiction with barrack ideal of the Emperor.

Under Nicholas I the Government tried to deprive the university education of its general and liberal character. The students, who were specializing at a definite faculty, were prohibited to attend lectures of other faculties; “general” sciences were taken off from the university courses, only special ones were left; the contents of courses were strictly controlled by the powers.

Nevertheless, the Statutes of 1835 was to some degree a recognition of Universities’ importance, an attempt to include them in a Empire institutions’ general system, giving to them relatively a high place. For so much efforts were spent to control them, then they were considered to be an important element of state machine.

The necessity of a new reform of University had been growing more evident after the Crimean War. Prince Tscherbatov, who worked out the project of the new Statutes of the University, gave to Russian universities an extremely curious diagnosis: “Crying faults of University education and science in Russia are explained by the prejudice of government against high theoretical education as well as by aspiration to attach utilitarian and practical character to University teaching”.

The struggle against utilitarianism inevitably appeared to be connected with the struggle for University autonomy. The destiny of the idea of the “open University”, analogues to College de France, is characteristic. It was put forward bith by left-radical leaders and by administrators – keepers of the pillars of autocracy, such as Baron Corf. From his point of view an “open University” can overcome dangerous corporative spirit of youth: “it’s very bad that the university represents something like a kind of original civil state, separated from all others”. Real interest to the project was shown by Earl Shuvalov, chief of the III-d department (political police of Russian Emperor), who had put forward an idea to annul entrance examinations in the University. But both students and professors resolutely protested against these intentions.

Struggle for autonomy, for shutting the University off the society and state control, for freedom of science paradoxically was connected with an establishment of a high role of universities just as the mouthpiece of public opinion. Universities appeared to be in the center of mutual movement for reforms. Admiral Putyatin, in 1861 being appointed a minister of Education, declared with a military strictness:

“from a certain moment the students, being influenced by professors, began to appreciate Universities not like institutions which ought to work out the ideas of better State governing, at the same time estimating themselves as persons, destined to play an important role in political existence of Russia».

The University of Kharkov had a reputation of more “calm” in comparison with the others. But even there the guardian of educational district D. Levshin anxiously reported to the tsar: “some professors under the pretext of university freedoms’ protection go too far that usurp the right to interfere in the subjects, which are not subjected to their competence”. General-major N. Annenkov, who investigated the University of Kharkov, comes to conclusion about “misunderstanding by the students of the idea of high mission of Universities… They consider that everyone of them, together with a student uniform, putting on, stands in the head of progress and enlightenment of the whole country and gains a right to solve all modern problems".
Again a historian, specializing in a history of medieval universities, recognizes in these invectives, the features of an ancient code of an university culture. With the help of similar reproaches the University of Paris was disapproved from 14th up to 16th centuries. In spite of evident specificity of Russian universities, they were included in a mutual European university space quite completely.

Besides the personal contacts of Russian professors with European universities there were also conscious attempts to intrude into the nature of the University phenomenon and a appeals to the problems of history and theory of Universities. Many articles which were devoted to these problems were bought as bestsellers. For example, the sketches of K. Kavelin and I. Babst. On the other hand the projects of university reforms were exposed before to European experts. Homogeneity of the European university space was manifested also in an astonishing consonants of the discourses of Russian struggles against the administrative utilitarianism (like Russian scientist N. Pirogov) with the John Newman’s conception of “ideal university”.

Belief in a liberal meaning of University education, accent on the process of forming of a well-developed persons, in Russia as well as in Dublin got along together with persuasion in the fact that the Universities were the sources of wisdom, lamp of universe, and they were called for to transform the whole society.

Student disorders, which had become since 1861 a constant factor of the Russian society’s life as well as the constant headache of the government, were one of the indices of a final integration of university into social tissue. The same kind of indicator was a struggle of public for a new universities’ creation, hot discussions on the educative problems.

Surely, Russian universities couldn’t help reflecting the specificity of Russian society. As a characteristic features of a Russian university system should be defined constantly high (even in the periods of maximum autonomy) dependence from the State and as a consequence, dependence from the subjective factor (from the character of a guardian, from the views of a minister, from the mood of a monarch). It could be also a reason for more evident (in comparison with the West) vulnerability of Russian universities.

On the other hand, a very specific role in Russia played an educative strata, that is to say – the famous Russian “intelligentsia”, which can be characterized by a hypertrophy of a traditional contradiction of university culture. It’s very special socio-cultural position, fencing it from the main parts of the society and from the State, coexisted with an aspiration to transform the social order to serve the country and to rule it. Intelligentsia was apt to pretend to the messianic role in the great deal of enlightenment and liberation of the people.

But in spite of the evident specificity of Russian universities and their dependence from surrounding reality, the role of internal university impulses, based on the logic of university milieu’s self-development and the code of university culture with its medieval character, is quite clear for us.

The ideology of Enlightenment with its utilitarian character, made it difficult to comprehend the essence of University phenomenon. Just on the contrary, every time the struggle against utilitarian approach and for academic autonomy led to debates not preventing from, but promoting the growing of the universities’ role in society.

But how far is it possible to develop the paradoxical idea about opposition of University phenomenon to Enlightenment?

I believe, that astonishing discrepancy so many times demonstrated by the history of University, can warn us against such straightforward proclamations. Really, belief in the direct practical use of Universities for the State as a convenient form of gaining practical special knowledge and from useful specialist’ training, leads to a mistaken understanding of the University’s nature. But this misunderstanding of powers many times was favorable for universities, and this extremely evident in Russia’s case. Utilitarian illusion of Enlightenment
promoted to propagation of Universities in Russian in 18th century. That very illusion saved the universities from the complete crush under Nicholas I, it protected the remains of University autonomy in the period of persecutions. It also helped to the existence of Universities during the years of Soviet State, although in a very exotic form.

However it’s already a subject for a special research, in which an astonishing viability of University phenomenon could be revealed with a far more coming persuasiveness.


2 The degree of changing of the power’s relation towards University is evident: if Nicholas I after the insurrection in 1830 closed the University of Vilno, then his son after rebellion in 1864 founded an University in Poland.


4 See for example the anonymous treatise of 14th c. De commendatione cleri // Thorndike L., ed. University records and life in the Middle Ages. –N.Y., Columbia University, 1944


6 Nicholas I imagined a state not only as a military barrack, but also a well-regulated mechanism – for he took perfect military-engineer education.