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The German System of Public Education in the Period between the 15th and early 20th centuries. Part 2

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Abstract

The second paper in the set explores the evolution of the Prussian elementary school system on the cusp of the 18th and 19th centuries. The authors examine the activity of squire Friedrich Eberhard von Rochow with regard to the establishment of rural schools on his lands.

The work's materials are grounded in a body of related research and special literature. The study's methodological basis rests on the principles of historicism, research objectivity, and systemicity, which are traditional in historiography. The authors have made use of the problem-chronological method to explore certain facts in the evolution of the German (Prussian) system of public education in the context of the then-existing historical situation. The use of this particular method has helped gain insight into the process of centralization of the German system of public education in the late 18th century.

The authors conclude by noting that, essentially, by the end of the 18th century the pedagogical community and central government in Prussia had both reached a common understanding of key needs in the elementary education system. It is in this period that a set of bills were passed regulating the nation's primary education system. Even dozens of years later, many of these pedagogy-related regulations would still retain their relevance, with modifications made to them only based on natural changes in the state of affairs in society.

Keywords: elementary schools, German Empire, Prussia, Friedrich Eberhard von Rochow, King Friedrich Wilhelm III.

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1. Introduction

As commonly known, compulsory elementary education was introduced in Prussia back in 1717 (Clark, 2006: 163). However, the system had long remained just on paper, with the schools getting insufficient attention from the government, which did little to fund the construction and upkeep thereof. It was really only up to the town councils, squires, or rural communities to get this cause going. Under the influence of the spirit of 18th-century educational philosophy and philanthropy, Germany would witness a number of more or less successful private efforts aimed at extending education to wider popular masses. Among the period's most prominent private figures, of particular mention is Brandenburg squire Friedrich Eberhard von Rochow, a canon of Halberstadt, who established several rural schools on his estates (Reckahn, Götting, and Krahn) and created an entire system of public education geared to the needs of rural residents. Educational facilities established by von Rochow would eventually go on to be regarded as a paragon of rural schools even in the late 19th century.

2. Materials and methods

The work's materials are grounded in a body of related research and special literature. The study's methodological basis rests on the principles of historicism, research objectivity, and systemicity, which are traditional in historiography. The authors have made use of the problem-chronological method to explore certain facts in the evolution of the German (Prussian) system of public education in the context of the then-existing historical situation. The use of this particular method has helped gain insight into the process of centralization of the German system of public education in the late 18th century.

3. Discussion

The historiography related to the subject under examination can be divided chronologically – into the pre-revolutionary historiography (1860–1917) and the contemporary historiography (1918–2019).

In terms of the pre-revolutionary historiography, researchers have devoted a significant amount of attention to issues of public education in Germany in particular and in Europe as a whole. The subject has been explored by scholars Yu.S. Rekhnevskii (Rekhnevskii, 1860), P.N. Voeikov (Voeikov, 1873), A.V. Belyavskii (Belyavskii, 1887), F. Paulsen (Paulsen, 1908), N.V. Speranskii (Speranskii, 1898), and others.

Researchers have demonstrated a high level of interest in the subject of philosophical currents in pedagogy as well. This area has been investigated by scholars H. Weimer (Weimer, 1913), M.I. Demkov (Demkov, 1912), E.P. Krevin (Krevin, 1915), E. Künoldt (Künoldt, 1897), G. Krenenberg (Krenenberg, 1896), F. Jakobi (Jakobi, 1916), F. Fischer (Fischer, 1912), and others.

In terms of the contemporary historiography, issues of the history of German pedagogy, in particular, and that of European pedagogy, at large, have been researched by scholars A.I. Piskunov (Piskunov, 1960), A.M. Mamadaliev (Mamadaliev et al., 2019), L.G. Abramova (Abramova, 2004), V.G. Bezrogov (Bezrogov, 2018), S.M. Marchukova (Marchukova, 2011), I.A. Sergienko (Sergienko, 2017), G. Rajović (Rajović et al., 2018; Rajović et al., 2018a), L.V. Obraztsova (Obraztsova, 1999), and others.

4. Results

Friedrich Eberhard von Rochow (1734–1805) was neither a pedagogue nor a scientist. As was common among Prussian nobility in those days, he chose a military career. After getting a superficial education at the Brandenburg Military Academy, he enlisted in the Prussian Guard. He took part in the Seven Years' War. Eventually, he had to leave military service after getting wounded in 1757. Von Rochow took up residence at his patrimonial estate of Reckahn. He devoted himself exclusively to agriculture, with a focus on care for the well-being of his peasants. Between 1771 and 1772, the region experienced a poor harvest, which resulted in increased prices, and later caused an epidemic among the residents and livestock. In an attempt to alleviate his peasants' suffering, von Rochow hired a physician to provide free medical care for the peasants. However, most of the peasants would not see and would not follow the instructions given to them by the doctor – mainly, due to various entrenched preconceptions and superstitions, negligence, uncouthness, or just apathy. Instead, the sick would turn to quacks, shepherders, and all kinds of charlatans,

whose services were quite costly, but, quite predictably, entire families would eventually perish this way. This is when von Rochow would actually step in and resolve to improve the level of public literacy – at least within the boundaries of his own estate (Rekhnevskii, 1860: 144).

As early as 1772, von Rochow produced his first essay, ‘An Attempt at a Schoolbook for Country Children, or for Use in Village Schools’. In discussing a set of means to be employed to improve the level of moral and mental education among the rural population, von Rochow fairly reasoned that, similar to a competent physician providing medical assistance to a mother nursing a newborn, a person who desires to improve public education must begin by improving the caliber of public teachers. To this end, he proposed the following measures:

1) the post of public school teacher should not be conferred on would-have-been craftsmen or lackeys; on the contrary, the position of rural teacher must be filled by candidates of theology, and from these one must elect rural preachers. If such candidates are not available and until teacher seminaries are in place, the position of teacher must be filled by diligent educated young people, who must first be taught the art of teaching by pastors;

2) rural teachers must be entitled to a salary of no less than 100 thalers per year, apart from housing, heating, and a garden, so as to have sufficient means of subsistence in order to be able to devote themselves to school wholly. With that said, each and every learner must receive education free of charge;

3) each rural school must have two grades; lectures must be no longer than six hours per day (four hours in the morning and two hours in the afternoon);

4) a rural school must be housed in a sturdy, warm, and light-filled building, and must have all the necessary facilities required in a school (Rekhnevskii, 1860: 146-147).

The second and third conditions implied considerable costs, so von Rochow would call on the authorities to provide the actual funding needed to establish the rural schools. Soon after his book was published, he received a complimentary letter from Karl von Zedlitz, Prussia’s then-Minister of Education, saying that King Friedrich II appreciated von Rochow’s aspirations and intended to establish in the Kurmark several schools based on his projects, and that a certain percentage of the sum of 100,000 thalers would be allocated toward teacher salaries (Rekhnevskii, 1860: 147). Initially, von Zedlitz wanted to hire school teachers from Saxony, which at the time was doing better in education than the Brandenburg region, but von Rochow managed to dissuade him from doing so by suggesting that Saxonians did not know the Lower Saxonian dialect, which was used by Brandenburg peasants.

Having secured support at this high a level, von Rochow set to carrying his project into effect. The care of the very first school (built at his main estate, Reckahn) was entrusted by von Rochow to his secretary Heinrich Julius Bruns, a music teacher. However, the school was immediately faced with a shortage of books needed to teach children. The Nuremberg ABC-book, used in public schools at the time, was too dry, boring, and poor in content, whilst the Bible, on the contrary, was too lofty and, thus, not readily accessible for rural schoolchildren. In an attempt to fill this gap, von Rochow would write and then publish the first part of his primer ‘The Friend of Children’.

Von Rochow and Bruns were perfectly aware that a key condition for success in learning is the teacher’s ability to make proper use of a textbook, i.e. the ability to first properly deliver the material to the student and then put questions to them based on that. To gain this ability, one would first have to undergo a few-months-long training in the use of the book, with trainees taking turns acting the parts of the teacher and the student. With the right groundwork in place, the two went on to open up in early 1773 a school of their own (Ignatovich, 1869: 26), for which they also created a constitution. The document was entitled ‘An Instruction Manual for Rural Teachers, or General and Special Directives to be Followed by Every Rural Teacher’ (Rekhnevskii, 1860: 148).

The school in Reckahn was comprised of the following premises: a stone building consisting of a teacher’s apartment and a large classroom with windows overlooking a garden. It was a unisex school divided into two grades: the first one was for little children, who were learning to read exclusively, and the second one was for their older counterparts. Classes for first-graders were held daily from 1:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m., and those for second-graders ran from 7:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. Children entered first grade at the age of six. When a child visited the school for the first time, the teacher was expected to receive them in a friendly manner and try to win their confidence. Normally, the teacher would have a chat with them, would ask them their name and age and ask

them about the rank and place of residence of their parents, and would then assign them a seat in the classroom in which they would have to sit in every class.

Instruction in the rules of the faith, based on the Reckahn system, was combined with instruction in reading, as the first books used for instruction dealt with catechism, Bible study, and Biblical history. In addition, students in each grade had to attend two hours of God's Law class weekly.

The school maintained strict discipline: before the final strike of the clock, all students had to be in their seats; each lesson commenced with a prayer, uttered by the teacher, and the singing of a few verses from the Psalms. During class, no student was allowed to leave the classroom. The roster of students who missed class would be forwarded to the squire, who would then have a talk with their parents about it. Bodily punishment was employed rarely, mainly in the event of theft or utter disobedience to the teacher. The Reckahn schools did not offer any achievement awards for students (Rekhnevskii, 1860: 155). This must have been due to European asceticism at the time. In terms of student punishment for violating school discipline, Von Rochow proposed the following, progressive, system of punishment: admonishing, reproving, reprimanding, and only then punishing one (Ignatovich, 1869: 26).

It did not take long before the educational efforts undertaken on von Rochow's estates started to bear fruit. The peasants quickly realized the benefits of learning, and would readily send their children to school, both in summer and in winter. Based on an eyewitness account, as early as 1792 "von Rochow's estates stand apart from all others in the morality of peasants, their level of education, and the level of agreement and harmony amongst them. Young people in both sexes are distinguished by modesty. Over a six-year period, there has been just one illegitimate birth. The squire and the pastor are enjoying the love and complete loyalty of the peasants. Soldiers hailing from Reckahn have, likewise, always been distinguished by their obedience, discipline, and sophistication" (Rekhnevskii, 1860: 155-156).

The Reckahn estate, inclusive of its rural schools, would soon enjoy wide fame. Thousands of travelers from Germany and other countries would visit Reckahn in order to see the school. The number of curious visitors would eventually become so large that this would start to interfere with the actual learning process (Ignatovich, 1869: 27). In conjunction with this, von Rochow would later issue a detailed description of his school.

Without question, it is in part under the influence of the time's overall pro-education sentiment in Germany, but more so under the influence of pedagogical ideas by von Rochow, that Friedrich II would resolve, during the last years of his life, to issue the following two statutes, which would prove crucial for the nation's elementary school system: (1) on establishing Prussia's Central Directorate for Educational Institutions and (2) on enacting into law the General Prussian Code. Both acts, drawn up by Minister of Education Karl von Zedlitz when Friedrich II was still alive, would be promulgated, based on the grounds established by the King, later on under his successor, Friedrich Wilhelm III. These statutes were underpinned by the key idea that all schools, both higher and lower, are public institutions (Ignatovich, 1869: 29).

During the Middle Ages and a period of time after the Reformation, educational facilities across Europe were regarded as belonging to the Church, as it is at churches that they were actually established. This led to the well-known rivalry between Catholics and Protestants in the area of public education (Mamadaliyev et al., 2019: 445-453). At the same time, German universities, most of which were established by imperial ruling princes, were right from the outset of their existence subject to government influence both administratively and economically.

It was enjoined via statutory initiatives that: (1) all schools, higher and lower, and universities in Prussia be treated as public institutions; 2) it be possible to open any school only with permission from the government; 3) all public educational institutions operate under the oversight of the government, which was empowered to make visits to them and inspect them at any time; 4) no person be denied enrolment in a public school based on religious affiliation (Ignatovich, 1869: 30).

Concurrently, the authorities established two seminaries for the training of future "higher school" teachers, one in Halle (as part of the university's theological seminary, established back in 1757) and one in Berlin. Enrolling in the seminary in Berlin required having a university education (Jeismann, 1996: 104-106).

Seminaries for the training of rural school teachers emerged later (Hamann, 1993: 87-88). Likewise, there were very few of them and at first they, too, were not independent entities but formed part of other educational institutions in cities like Königsberg, Züllichau, Stettin, etc. The first independent seminary emerged in 1778 in the city of Halberstadt.

Another area that was enshrined in law was regulation of the operation of rural elementary schools, which included the following eight items:

1. Local administration and oversight. The operation of community schools was to be overseen by the local civil authorities, with participation from the local clergy. A church-warden was to keep watch over external order in the schools and make a note of any imperfections, of which, along with any suggestions on how to improve a certain area, they were to notify a local civil officer and the clergy;

2. Appointment of teachers. This was up to the local authorities. Note that no one could be appointed to the position of school teacher without having provided a legal certificate of their having passed a relevant exam and been proven fit to perform the duties of a teacher;

3. Teacher oversight. Teachers in community schools were answerable to the local civil authorities, which, with participation from a clerical school inspector, supervised the proper execution of duties by them and were empowered to impose fines on them in the event of violation of the obligations assumed by them;

4. Pay for teachers. Where community schools did not possess special funds, the provision of funds to pay the teachers was to be the obligation of male-heads of the family, regardless of whether or not they had children and no matter which faith they practiced. Note that in the case of special schools established for a particular religious denomination, the residents, accordingly, were to be divided in this context by religious denomination. The size of contribution, both monetary and in-kind, was to be commensurate with each family male-head's financial capacity. The communities were to bear all costs associated with the travel of newly appointed teachers, along with members of their own family, and the moving of their personal belongings, including their clothing, linen, home furniture, silverware, and books;

5. The upkeep of the school building. The upkeep of the school house and the teacher's apartment was the obligation of family male-heads as well. Note that a member of a different community whose child was attending the same school was to pay only half of the tax. For activities like construction and repairs of school buildings, the city councils and rural squires were to provide free of charge any necessary construction materials from city- and squire-owned forests if those were available; if these materials were not available, construction materials had to be purchased for the school. No one was exempt from paying the school-upkeep tax based on religious affiliation;

6. Parent obligations. Every family male-head who could not or did not want to have their child taught at home was to send them to school at the age of five. A child was allowed to stay at home beyond this age only with permission from the local civil authorities and the clerical school inspector. Children who, due to their household chores, were unable to attend school on a regular basis were to attend it on Sundays, during a break from those chores, or at any other convenient time. A student was to go to school until the spiritual adviser declared that they finally possessed the amount of knowledge appropriate for a sensible person of their social class;

7. Student oversight. Under the auspices of the local civil authorities, a school watcher was to keep watch both over the accurate execution of duties by teachers *and* over the behavior and attendance of school-age children in school. If need be, the officer was empowered to employ enforcement measures in respect of negligent parents and impose penalties on them. The local preacher (a teacher of religion) was to help the educational facility achieve its objectives not only through their supervisory activity but their own teaching work as well;

8. School discipline. The enforcement of school discipline must never involve the use of punishments that could result in any kind of harm to a child's health. If the teacher was convinced that a soft punishment did not work against continuous violations of discipline by a student, they were to notify of this the local civil authorities and the clerical school inspector, which, with participation from the parents, would then study the case more closely and take appropriate measures to reform the child's behavior (Ignatovich, 1869: 31-32).

Thus, in the late 18th century, Germany witnessed the establishment of control over all of the kingdom's educational institutions. The religious cleavage between Protestants and Catholics in the area of public education was overcome thanks to the position assumed by the relevant central

authority. Directly answerable to the King, it consisted of several secular members, under the chairmanship of the Minister of State. All agenda issues were to be decided by majority voting. This central educational agency oversaw the operation of all Prussian universities, gymnasia, knight academies, urban and rural schools, orphanages, children's homes, and boarding schools, totally regardless of religious affiliation. Its ambit covered the following areas: (1) ensuring the proper structuring of the operation of all types of educational institution; ensuring the provision of proper education *in* and implementation of improvements *to* them in keeping with modern trends and in alignment with the school's special characteristics; ensuring that all facilities use decent textbooks and top teaching methods; gathering the most accurate and detailed information on the state of affairs in the school; (2) conducting school audits; (3) keeping watch over the admission into educational facilities that fell under the agency's remit of persons who had yet to provide proof of having passed relevant exams; (4) working to establish in convenient areas across the country seminaries for the training of teachers, especially elementary school instructors (Ignatovich, 1869: 33).

The significance of these two statutes lies in that all of the above resolutions would continue to remain relevant even nearly 100 years later. The slight changes to them would either deal with their outward form or have to do with their further development and enhancement. Yet, it may be worth noting that the above resolutions were focused solely on the outward organization of public schools, as well as their administrative and economic relationships, whilst things like actual learning, its needs, objectives, spirit, and areas of focus were left totally ignored. We find all of this in two other government statutes: (1) Minister Johann von Wöllner's Regulations for Public School Teachers, Urban and Rural, on Ways to Provide Proper Education to Disciples Entrusted to Their Care (December 16, 1794) and (2) King Friedrich Wilhelm III's Edict for All Regiments and Battalions on the True Needs of Education in Garrison Schools (August 31, 1799) (Ignatovich, 1869: 33-34).

Friedrich Wilhelm III's edict reflected his true vision of elementary education and of its objectives. This vision would be acknowledged by the pedagogical community even 100 years later. Here is a quote from the edict: "Truly educated, and therefore useful to themselves and to society, is a person who has a clear idea of all their relations and obligations within the circle which fate has placed them in and knows how to meet those obligations. This objective is what education in all public schools is to be confined to. Teaching a commoner sciences they will not be able to make use of in their field of activity may be regarded as a waste of time. The reasoning is that a commoner will very soon forget what they were taught in school, while whatever stays in their memory may turn into obscure concepts in their heads, resulting in all kinds of fallacies and desires that cannot be satisfied given their status – this may lead to disgruntlement with their lot and general unhappiness.

The primary objective for the elementary school system is to teach commoners what they will need to be useful to others and be content with their status. If met, this requirement will no longer be seen as negligible as it seems at first glance. The true purpose of school is to better familiarize a person with their human, Christian, civil, and family obligations and help them get proficient in various crafts, so that they can later choose for themselves an area that best matches their abilities and propensities; above all, it must teach them to read, write, and count well" (Ignatovich, 1869: 36).

Thus, two of Friedrich II's nearest successors, who, likewise, were committed to educating all of the strata of society and were tolerant toward religion, would deem it necessary to undertake measures against dangerous (liberal) thinking, which started to emerge in elementary schools, as well as against the expansion of the volume of elementary education in top public schools. There, however, were very few schools like these in the late 18th century. It will not be an overstatement to put the estimated number of schools which provided proper pedagogical education in Germany at the time at one-sixth, with the rest five-sixth, especially schools in rural areas, employing young people taught by the local clergy or disabled soldiers, tailors, night watches, and shepherds, still. For the sake of fairness, it should be noted that these candidates would first have to have an appointment with the school inspector and at the latter's directive take an exam with the local pastor. However, there were very few worthy candidates, as the position of rural teacher still remained lowly attractive. Even in the late 18th century the government still continued to encourage rural teachers to engage in sericulture. Almost everyone grew mulberry trees and kept silkworms

(Ignatovich, 1869: 38). This would lead to teachers getting badly distracted from performing their direct duties, while their profit from this was rather negligible.

However, that was not the only (and not the root) cause of the poor state of affairs with regard to rural schools in Prussia. The crux of the problem lay in the low social status of rural commoners, with the various forms of dependent labor, including *corvée*, by all means discouraging rural residents from properly cultivating their spiritual and mental powers (Kareev, 1894: 210). As accurately noted by von Rochow, rural commoners “had become barbaric like an animal, ill-tempered, and totally disgruntled with themselves, the whole world, the authorities, and God” (Ignatovich, 1869: 38).

By the start of the 19th century, the pedagogical community had succeeded in making the Prussian King aware of the issue. As a consequence, on October 9, 1807 the government issued an edict designed to abolish all forms of hereditary subjection to seigneurial will and jurisdiction, including by birth, marriage, subject position held, or contract. The document provided each and every rural resident with the full freedom to use their property as they desire and choose their profession. However, before this historic event finally came to pass the German school system continued to remain in rather poor shape. In 1798, King Friedrich Wilhelm III, when appointing Ludwig von Massow Minister of the Royal House, demanded that he present a set of proposals regarding the improvement of Germany’s system of elementary schools. The King was resolute in his belief that it was high time to give earnest thought to providing proper education for the children of urban and those of rural residents alike. According to the King, “education and upbringing help provide guidance to one right from an early age; both of these processes are commonly entrusted to our schools, whose influence on the well-being of our nation is, therefore, of immense significance. This has long been acknowledged by everybody. Yet, government support has thus far been provided almost exclusively to research schools alone. Whilst, as regards elementary schools, which are designed to provide proper education to large numbers of residents, i.e. all subjects and their children, nothing has been done for them yet, excepting a few unsuccessful initiatives undertaken to this end. First and foremost, we need to take care of preparing good teachers for these schools. There is a need to explore the actual state of affairs with regard to local teachers and design appropriate measures for overhauling and enhancing their professional competence, in keeping with the local characteristics. The government’s support must supplement what the local population is unable to provide the elementary schools with” (Ignatovich, 1869: 39-40).

5. Conclusion

Essentially, by the end of the 18th century the pedagogical community and central government in Prussia had both reached a common understanding of key needs in the elementary education system. It is in this period that a set of bills were passed regulating the nation’s primary education system. Even dozens of years later, many of these pedagogy-related regulations would still retain their relevance, with modifications made to them only based on natural changes in the state of affairs in society.

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