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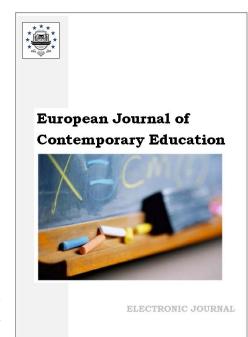
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Public Libraries in the Russian Empire at the Turn of the 19th and 20th centuries: Key Characteristics of Their Operation

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Abstract

This work explored the operation of public libraries in the Russian Empire at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. Consideration was given to the legal-and-regulatory framework for such libraries, their distribution by type, and the key characteristics of how their book stock was funded and built.

The principal sources for the study were relevant collections of materials and those of published documents.

The study's findings revealed that at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries public libraries served in Russia as an important tool for the self-education of both the nation's young and adults. By the end of the 19th century, a significant amount of experience had been amassed in Russia in terms of educating youth and creating the conditions for fostering citizenship in individual members of society. This education was grounded in the family as the basis on which the state is organized, benevolence, and staying true to one's obligations.

By the start of the 20th century, Russian librarians managed to create the conditions for popularizing public libraries in society. This was done via visual attraction (e.g., attracting young readers via drawing and painting exhibitions) and a diverse repertory, typically dominated by works of fiction. The nation's vast network of libraries provided its population, including those living in the countryside, with an opportunity to self-educate.

Keywords: public library, self-education, literacy, Russian Empire, regulatory framework, sustainable development in education, education policy, education reform.

1. Introduction

At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, the government of the Russian Empire undertook a series of measures to spread literacy in Russian society. The focus was not only on reaching as many

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individuals with school education as possible but also creating appropriate conditions for out-of-school education, especially for adults. A significant part of out-of-school education was free public libraries, which operated not only in the nation's cities but its agrarian areas as well. The present work is focused on the characteristics of the operation of such libraries in the Russian Empire.

2. Materials and methods

The principal sources for the study were relevant collections of materials and those of published documents. The former included a variety of recommendations regarding the opening of public libraries, namely 'How to Open and Organize Public Free Libraries, Reading Rooms, School Libraries, and Public Readings' (Kak otkryvat'..., 1900), 'A Handbook for the Organization of Free Public Libraries and Reading Rooms' (Rukovodstvo..., 1895), and the book selection catalog 'School Libraries for Children Aged Under 15' (Shkol'nye biblioteki..., 1908).

The second group included both collected documents (e.g., 'Laws and Reference Information on Primary Public Education' (Zakony..., 1898)) and a set of regulations relating to the work of actual libraries (Pravila..., 1890; Ukazaniya..., 1897; Primernyi ustav..., 1894).

The study was grounded in principles of scholarly historical inquiry such as historicism and objectivity. Use was made of methods such as analysis and summarization. The use of these principles and methods helped take a comprehensive look at the regulatory framework for public libraries and identify the key characteristics of the operation of such libraries in Russia at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries.

3. Discussion

While the historiography on the subject is fairly extensive, it has been appearing over the last 100 years in quite an uneven manner. The first publications on public libraries began to come out back in the imperial period. For instance, in 1894 M.F. Superansky addressed the subject of creating public libraries and reading rooms (Superanskii, 1894). Around the same time, in 1897, S.G. Smirnov investigated the attitude of the peasantry toward the creation of public libraries (Smirnov, 1897).

During the Soviet period, back at the time of the Civil War in Russia, there came out a work by A.K. Pokrovskaya on the operation of children's and school libraries (Pokrovskaya, 1919). Of note is that in that work the author assumes a fairly liberal stance and you don't really feel the pressure of Soviet ideology. Subsequent to the rise of J.V. Stalin's personality cult, the subject of Russian Empire-period public libraries was given little to no attention, as it did not fit into the Soviet narrative about "illiterate, horse-and-buggy Russia". Nevertheless, even during that time such writings did appear in certain narrowly specialized publications (e.g., 'The First Public Libraries' by M.Ya. Dvorkina, an article published in the magazine *Bibliotekar'* (Russian: "Librarian") (Dvorkina, 1978)).

The early 21st century witnessed the subject's true renaissance. It is during this time that the topic of imperial-period public libraries was investigated in both the national and regional contexts. Specifically, the subject of public libraries in the Russian Empire in the 1850s–1860s was explored by M.Yu. Matveyev (Matveev, 2012). The subject of public libraries run by the Society of Adherents of Russian History at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries was explored by Yu Jie (Tsze, 2023).

At the same time, the subject has been keenly investigated in the regional aspect. Specifically, N.P. Glukhova explored the operation of free public libraries through the example of Tomsk Oblast (Glukhova, 2006); T.L. Kononova explored similar processes in Kursk Governorate (Kononova, 2013); public libraries in the Far East were explored by I.A. Zemlyansky (Zemlyanskii, 2013); urban public libraries in Saint Petersburg were explored by V.N. Novikov (Novikov, 2008); the emergence of public libraries in Nizhny Novgorod Governorate was explored by Ye.G. Kapranova (Kapranova, 2010); World War I-period public libraries and readings during were explored by Ye.Yu. Semenova through the example of Samara and Simbirsk Governorates (Semenova, 2004); public education in Orel Governorate was explored by Ye.P. Sleptsova (Sleptsova, 2021); secular urban libraries in Tobol Governorates were explored by A.I. Dudkin (Dudkin, 2020); librarianship in Altai District was explored by M.N. Potupchik (Potupchik, 2017); the establishment of public libraries in Transbaikalia was explored by M.I. Sannikova (Sannikova, 2012).

4. Results

Legal-and-regulatory framework for public libraries

In their operation, public libraries and public reading rooms in the Russian Empire were guided by relevant pieces of legislation. Specifically, the main document regulating the operation of public reading rooms was *The Rules on Free Public Reading Rooms and the Procedure for the Oversight Thereof* (Pravila..., 1890). The rules were signed into law by the Minister of Internal Affairs of the Russian Empire on May 15, 1890, and were soon published. There were a total of 11 clauses, and it was clearly specified who would be responsible for the opening of such reading rooms and who would be concerned with overseeing their operation (Pravila..., 1890: 1-4).

The operation of actual libraries or reading rooms was regulated by a charter. A typical charter for a free library (reading room) comprised 19 clauses and listed the place the library was opened, the objectives behind its establishment, the sources of funding for it, the characteristics of how its book stock was built, information relating to the oversight thereof, information relating to the management thereof, and its benefactors (Primernyi ustay, 1894: 1-3).

By the end of the 19th century, numerous documents had been published in the Russian Empire regulating the operation of public libraries. Since many of such documents were open to different interpretations, the government would also work on the provision of comments to accompany the relevant ordinances. For instance, such comments would deal with the opening of public libraries within educational institutions, allowing the peasantry to make free use of rural schools under the purview of the Ministry of Public Education, and procedures for the establishment of public libraries (Zakony..., 1898: 544-548).

Tupologu

At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, there were three types of public libraries in the Russian Empire: 1) libraries under the purview of the Ministry of Internal Affairs; 2) libraries under the purview of the Ministry of Public Education; 3) libraries under the purview of the country's top ecclesiastical authority.

Those in the first group were typically established in private or public buildings and opening them required permission from a local governor. A public library under the purview of the Ministry of Public Education was normally based in the building of a public school, i.e. in a classroom. Opening one would require permission from the Ministry of Public Education. Lastly, establishing a public library in a church, a parochial school, an ecclesiastical school, or a literacy school would require permission from the top ecclesiastical authority (Kak otkryvat'..., 1900: 1).

During the period under review, non-recurrent expenditure on fitting out a public library was relatively not high. For urban libraries, the sum of 200–300 rubles would suffice (exclusive of the librarian's pay and payment for the building), whereas 50 rubles would be enough for rural ones. Where a library included a reading room, additional expenditure on furniture and lighting would be required, whilst where a library could only lend visitors books to take home it would suffice to just have a bookcase, a chair, and a table in order to provide customer service to them (Kak otkryvat'..., 1900: 4).

Funding

Rural libraries were funded via the following:

- special contributions levied for the purpose on local residents;
- fines:
- taxes:
- capital and revenue of banks and lending institutions;
- capital of villages;
- various fees and levies (Kak otkryvat'..., 1900: 5).

In terms of book purchase, it was encouraged in creating a public library to try to spend the funds as economically as possible. Indeed, in light of the provision of only limited funding for the purpose, every saved ruble could buy as many as 10 to 20 good books.

The late 19th century witnessed in the Russian Empire a widespread use of gubernia book warehouses, intended to help boost literacy among the population. Such warehouses contained ready-to-use sets of books for rural and urban libraries and these were 10–15% cheaper due to lower wholesale prices (Kak otkryvat'..., 1900: 6).

In selecting books, it was important to keep in mind that they would be read aloud not only to school-age individuals but to adults as well, both literate and illiterate. No matter how small a library's book stock was, it was recommended for it to include the works of Pushkin, Lermontov,

Gogol, Turgenev, Goncharov, Dostoyevsky, Krylov, and other classical writers. As it had become clear by the late 19th century that most Russian readers preferred works of fiction, most libraries in the Russian Empire had at least half of their book stock represented by this particular genre (Kak otkryvat'..., 1900: 6).

Another noteworthy fact is that in the early 20th century there existed the practice of publishing and republishing catalogs of selected books for children of different ages for school libraries. An example is the catalog 'School Libraries for Children Aged Under 15', compiled by a group of female teachers (D.E. Zevig, M.P. Lopyreva, Ye.Ye. Solov'yeva, Ye.I. Tikheyeva, and L.I. Tikheyeva) (Shkol'nye biblioteki, 1908). Let us take a quick look at the kind of literature that was recommended for a school library back then. Most of the works of fiction were focused on the family, followed by orphans and abandoned children, with the rest of the common topics including "how important children are in our lives", "love for people", "selflessness", "working for the benefit of society", "striving to be morally upright", "striving for freedom", "significance of art", "moral qualms", and "slavery". A standalone category was "remarkable people", which comprised themes such as "people with a strong will power", "people with a strong will power in everyday life", "people of science", "preachers and sages", and "musicians and artists". A separate theme was "writers" - it was focused on writers' biographies, writers' works adapted for children, foreign writers, and collections of literary works and poems. The spiritual-moral section was represented by themes such as "Old Testament", "New Testament", "heroes of the faith", and "pilgrimage to a holy site" (Shkol'nye biblioteki..., 1908: 1-40). Thus, most of the works of fiction recommended for reading were oriented toward nurturing one to be a highly spiritual and patriotic person, with a particular focus being on the family as a major unit in our social structure, benevolence, and service to your country.

The section 'Natural Science' covered botany, zoology, geology, mineralogy, physics, and geography. The section 'Prehistoric Past' comprised general history (ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome and medieval England, Scandinavia, Bulgaria, Holland, France, Germany, Italy, and America) and Russian history (explored in a retrospective manner and by way of collections of historical documents) (Shkol'nye biblioteki..., 1908: 41-78).

At the end of the catalog was a little section containing the titles of books for free choice by students and books for teachers and a list of children's magazines (Shkol'nye biblioteki..., 1908: 79-95).

The time of giving out books was largely dependent on local conditions. For instance, with rural libraries, it would suffice to designate 2 to 3 days a week and 3 to 4 hours a day for the purpose. If libraries contained a reading room, they would have to operate on a more frequent and lengthy basis, and especially so in winter. Some of the best days for libraries to be open were holidays and market days.

Operation of libraries: registration of books given out, library customers, and reading room visitors

A public library typically had a special book where a librarian would write down information about each customer (full name, address, age, gender, and occupation). The same book would capture information about the giving out of books (the time a book was given out, its number in the catalog, and its title). It was not mandatory to write down the time the book was returned. Based on these records, an annual report would be drawn up containing information such as the number of customers, their distribution by gender, age, education, and occupation, the number of books given out across the various sections of the catalog, the most in-demand books, etc. (Kak otkryvat'..., 1900: 7).

Gathering such data was highly significant for getting an idea of how a library worked. As regards reading rooms, visitor records for them were limited to the following data: number of visitors, visitor distribution by gender and age, and number of books, newspapers, and magazines given out. Such records would form the basis for monthly and yearly reports on the operation of a reading room (Kak otkryvat'..., 1900: 7).

Rural libraries had rules of their own:

- "1. Books are given out for reading at home free of charge, with no security or guarantee required.
 - 2. Each customer can take home only one book at a time.
- 3. A customer can keep a book for no longer than 2 weeks; otherwise, they will have to get permission from the librarian.

- 4. A customer must treat each library book with care. The librarian reserves the right to fine a customer for a damaged or lost book the amount equal to the cost thereof.
- 5. A customer who fails to comply with the library's rules may be deprived by the librarian of the right to take books home to read." (Kak otkryvat'..., 1900: 22-23).

In Russian libraries, a fair amount of attention was paid to the issue of lost or damaged books. It was customary for librarians to quickly look through books returned by customers. A book's title page would list the number of colored pictures in it and the pictures themselves would be numbered so that it would be easier to check if they were intact. Some libraries would have a customer look through the book they were borrowing and ascertain it was intact. The rationale behind measures such as control of damaged and overdue books was to keep customers confident that a library strove to treat the books with care and maintain them in good physical condition and try to instill this sense of responsibility in them as well (Pokrovskaya, 1919: 19-20).

In 1916, an organization named the Russian Library Society was established in the Russian Empire on the initiative of attendees of the Moscow Library Courses. It sought to unite the efforts of librarians across the country for the purposes of enhancing librarianship and improving training for members of this professional community and their conditions of employment. As early as 1919, the Society published A.K. Pokrovskaya's 'On Work in Children's and School Libraries (Key Tenets and Practical Techniques)' (Pokrovskaya, 1919). According to the author's characterization of the way the stock of a children's library was typically built back then, of the total number of books in one, around 10 % were to be oriented toward those in the preschool group, 20 % – elementary group, 30 % – junior high group, and 40 % – senior high group. There was to be the following distribution across the key catalog sections: fiction – 60 % (fairytales and legends – 10 %, stories about children – 10 %, adventures and travels – 10 %, poems and plays – 10 %, classics – 10 %, and picture books – 10 %), reference books and magazines – 4 %, philosophy and morality – 1 %, religion – 2 %, social science – 2 %, linguistics – 1 %, exact sciences – 6 %, applied sciences – 4 %, art – 2%, literature – 2%, history – 6%, biography – 4%, and geography – 6% (Pokrovskaya, 1919: 13-14).

The choice of books in a library would have to be such as to be focused on meeting the interests of a child, responding to their practical needs, and helping them learn more about the world around them (Pokrovskaya, 1919: 14).

Interior design of libraries

A fair amount of attention was paid to the interior design of libraries as well. Specifically, in fitting out a children's library, there was a trend toward accentuating aspects such as tone consistency, coziness, cordiality and friendliness, simplicity, and fit-for-purpose design, with a focus on engaging the kids in decorating the library. A practice advised against was hanging the portraits of individuals who were alien to the children. It was recommended to use paintings and portraits that were comprehensible and interesting to them and change such art works on a regular basis in step with what was going on around in life. Librarians were encouraged to display collections of children's drawings, including those gifted by children customers, as a way to encourage children's creativity. An encouraged practice was decorating a library with elements of nature (e.g., bouquets of flowers, tree branches, leaves, flowers grown by a library's visitors, or aquariums looked after by the children (Pokrovskaya, 1919: 20-21)).

5. Conclusion

At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries public libraries served in Russia as an important tool for the self-education of both the nation's young and adults. By the end of the 19th century, a significant amount of experience had been amassed in Russia in terms of educating youth and creating the conditions for fostering citizenship in individual members of society. This education was grounded in the family as the basis on which the state is organized, benevolence, and staying true to one's obligations.

By the start of the 20th century, Russian librarians managed to create the conditions for popularizing public libraries in society. This was done via visual attraction (e.g., attracting young readers via drawing and painting exhibitions) and a diverse repertory, typically dominated by works of fiction. The nation's vast network of libraries provided its population, including those living in the countryside, with an opportunity to self-educate.

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