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Published in the USA

European Journal of Contemporary Education
E-ISSN 2305-6746
2023. 12(1): 253-258
DOI: 10.13187/ejced.2023.1.253
<https://ejce.cherkasgu.press>

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The History of Education

The Public Education System and Culture of a Typical Uyezd Town in the Pre-Reform Russian Empire: The Case of Ostashkov, Tver Governorate

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Abstract

This work explores the system of public education and cultural life in the pre-reform uyezd town of Ostashkov, Tver Governorate.

The principal sources used for this study were materials from the *Memorandum Books* for Tver Governorate and pre-revolutionary periodical press materials from the newspaper *Tverskiye Yeparkhialnyye Vedomosti*. Methodologically, the work relied on the following fundamental historical principles: historicism, systematicity, and objectivity. This helped examine the system of public education system in the town of Ostashkov, Tver Governorate, in the period up to the abolition of serfdom in 1861 in a historical sequence, as well as systematize the available material into several groups – educational institutions, student body composition, institutions of culture, and cultural life.

The study's findings revealed that on the eve of the abolition of serfdom in 1861 out of the town's 10,876 residents 4,508 attended a civil primary school. A fairly large portion of the town's population went to an ecclesiastical educational institution (although not all of those students were native residents of the town – some came from the uyezd). Some of its residents received education prior to 1852, including privately. Overall, around 6,000 residents of the town had a primary education on the eve of the abolition of serfdom, or more than 50 % of its total population. The high literacy rate was conducive to a corresponding level of culture (boulevards, gardens,

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public libraries, and a theater). These factors set the town of Ostashkov apart from most conventional uyezd towns in the Russian Empire.

Keywords: town, Ostashkov, Tver Governorate, pre-reform period, abolition of serfdom, public education, theater.

1. Introduction

The uyezd town of Ostashkov, located in the Russian Empire's Tver Governorate, was founded in 1770. By 1825, its population was 7,852 ([Statisticheskoe izobrazhenie..., 1829](#)). In 1862, i.e. right after the abolition of serfdom, the town had 10,876 residents (5,408 males and 5,468 females) ([Chislo zhitelei, 1863: 42-43](#)). There were 146 nobles, 280 persons of ecclesiastical status, 9,075 urban dwellers, inclusive of merchants and urban commoners, 44 rural dwellers, 1,170 members of the military estate, and 161 foreigners ([Chislo zhitelei, 1863: 42-43](#)). The present work's primary focus is on the system of public education in the town of Ostashkov. It will also take a look at the town's cultural sector in the pre-reform period, i.e. prior to the abolition of serfdom in 1861.

2. Materials and methods

The principal sources used for this study were materials from the *Memorandum Books* for Tver Governorate ([Chislo zhitelei, 1863](#); [R-v, 1863](#)) and pre-revolutionary periodical press materials from the newspaper *Tverskiye Yeparkhialnyye Vedomosti* ([Tverskie eparkhial'nye vedomosti, 1878](#)).

Methodologically, the work relied on the following fundamental historical principles: historicism, systematicity, and objectivity. This helped examine the system of public education system in the town of Ostashkov, Tver Governorate, in the period up to the abolition of serfdom in 1861 in a historical sequence, as well as systematize the available material into several groups – educational institutions, student body composition, institutions of culture, and cultural life.

3. Discussion

The historiography on the subject can be split into two groups of research works. The first group includes the research dealing with the pre-reform town of Ostashkov. The second group includes the research concerned with the socio-economic development of Tver Governorate.

The works in the first group, most notably, include protoiereus V.P. Uspensky's 'A Note on the Past of the Town of Ostashkov', which covers the period from the emergence of slobodas in 1395 on the site of the future town to the early 19th century ([Uspenskii, 1893](#)), I.F. Tokmakov's 'The Town of Ostashkov and Its Uyezd', which explores the history of the town and its outskirts through the lens of a body of archeological and historical-statistical information ([Tokmakov, 1906](#)), and N.I. Rubtsov's 'An Essay on Ostashkov', which provides a detailed account of the town's socio-economic life ([R-v, 1863](#)). Attempts to provide a historical-statistical description of the town were undertaken by other authors as well ([Istoriko-statisticheskoe..., 1880](#)). Among the more specific topics relating to the town of Ostashkov that have been explored in the literature are the designing of the historical boulevard there ([Chernikov, 2018](#)) and the level of school education of members of the clergy in the town of Ostashkov in the 18th century ([Matison, 2012](#)).

The second group includes the works on the history of the Church in Tver Governorate and those on the history of civil institutions there. Those on the history of the Church include P.V. Znamensky's 'Ecclesiastical Schools in Russia in the Period up to the 1808 Reform' ([Znamenskii, 2001](#)), T.G. Leont'yeva's 'Ecclesiastical Fraternities in Tver Governorate: Their Purpose and Activity in the Second Half of the 19th and Early 20th Centuries' ([Leont'eva, 2021](#)), and V.A. Simora's 'Pilgrimage in the Parochial School of the Tver Diocese in the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries' ([Simora, 2013](#)). The works on the history of civil institutions include D. Krylov's 'The 25th Anniversary of Tver Mariinsky Female Gymnasium (1858–1883): A Historical Note' ([Krylov, 1883](#)), A.Ye. Otorochkina's 'The Development of Female Education in the Governorates in the Upper Volga Region in the First Half of the 19th Century' ([Otorochkina, 2015](#)), A.Ye. Andreyev's 'Oversight of the Work of Administrative Institutions in Tver Governorate at the Turn of the 19th and 20th Centuries' ([Andreev, 2015](#)), and N.V. Sereda's 'Tver Merchants' Documents of Private Origin as a Cultural Asset' ([Sereda, 2021](#)).

To date there has been no dedicated research on the system of public education system in the pre-reform town of Ostashkov, Tver Governorate. The present work aims to fill this gap.

4. Results

Educational institutions

The uyezd town of Ostashkov was founded in 1770. Five years after it received the status of an uyezd town, an attempt was made to establish the town's first private school. This attempt was undertaken in 1775 by an urban commoner named Sukhorukova. Two years later, on January 7, 1777, the town became home to its first public school for children of merchants and urban commoners. The primary school's curriculum included traditional subjects such as Divinity, Arithmetic, Writing, and Drawing. Instruction in Reading was conducted via an ABC book and a Book of Psalms, and that in Writing and Drawing – via a textbook from Professor D.S. Anichkov (*Istoriko-statisticheskoe...*, 1880: 20). Instruction in Divinity and Mathematics was typically conducted by persons of ecclesiastical status, and that in Writing and Drawing – by urban dwellers. There were just 40 full-time students. The cost of tuition was 3 rubles per year for children of merchants and 1 ruble per year for children of urban commoners; a number of places were also available for the free education of disadvantaged students. Teachers had the following salaries: teachers of Divinity – 25; teachers of Reading and Writing – 15, and teachers of Drawing – 20 rubles per year (*Istoriko-statisticheskoe...*, 1880: 22). As early as the summer of 1778, the number of full-time students at the school reached 40, with 27 of these paying for their education (*Istoriko-statisticheskoe...*, 1880: 23). For some reason, the school closed down in 1786.

While fairly limited, these first attempts to create the town's education sector helped lay an important groundwork for its future public system and create a local educated workforce. As in other regions across the Russian Empire, the process of creation of private schools in Tver Governorate involved a number of challenges. Firstly, such schools were maintained through tuition fees, meaning that students' parents had to be fairly well-off. Secondly, private schools were often maintained through funding from benefactors. Hence, if the number of well-off parents in the area was low and there were no benefactors to rely on for funding, such schools would simply have to close down. This was the case with the schools opened in 1775–1777.

In 1786, the government of the Russian Empire adopted a law aimed at the opening of educational institutions in all towns across the country (four-grade schools in gubernia towns and two-grade schools in uyezd towns).

Consequently, on November 30, 1787, the town of Ostashkov became home to its first uyezd school, which would be maintained through funding from the state (*R-v, 1863: 170*). From there on out, the town's education system was distinguished by stability, ceasing to rely on charitable donations for funding. The newly established educational institution had two teachers. The first was paid 150, and the second – 120 rubles per year. Another 60 rubles would be paid to whoever taught Drawing (*Istoriko-statisticheskoe...*, 1880: 23).

As early as the early 19th century, in March 1805, the town became home to another two schools. These parish urban schools would be funded through charitable donations. In September 1853, the town became home to its third parish urban school, which, likewise, would be maintained through charitable donations. As of 1861, all of the town's three parish urban schools were maintained through funding from a collegiate councilor named Voronin, who provided 1,400 rubles toward the purpose yearly (*R-v, 1863: 170*).

In 1839, the town became home to a female school. Thus, as of 1839 education in Ostashkov was accessible to both boys and girls. In 1861, public funding for the female school amounted to 580 rubles per year. These funds were used to pay teacher salaries (*R-v, 1863: 170*).

As of 1861, the uyezd school was housed in a rented building, whilst the parish and female schools were housed in a charitable home that was part of the commercial bank owned by merchant K.A. Savin.

Composition of the town's student body

In the period from 1852 to 1861, the uyezd school had an enrollment of 807 students. In the same period, the town's three parish urban schools had a combined enrollment of 1,784 students, and the female school had an enrollment of 1,917 students (*R-v, 1863: 170-171*). Thus, in the decade from 1852 to 1861 the town of Ostashkov had a combined student body of 4,508. Its largest educational institution was the female school, which was attended by an average of 191 students per year, followed by the uyezd school (80) and then the parish schools (59 each).

Table 1 displays the data on the social estate composition of the town's student body in the period 1851–1861.

Table 1. Distribution of Students Across Ostashkov's Civil Educational Institutions by Social Estate in the Period 1851–1861 (R-v, 1863: 170-171)

Educational institution	Children of nobles	Children of officers	Children of clergy	Children of merchants	Children of urban commoners	Children of members of other social classes	Total
Uyezd school	55	33	26	330	358	5	807
Three parish schools	13	43	15	676	978	59	1,784
Female school	25	67	15	795	995	20	1,917
Total	93	143	56	1,801	2,331	84	4,508

As evidenced in Table 1, half of the town's total student body (4,508 students) was made up by urban commoners (51.8 %), followed by children of merchants (40 %) and then children of officers (3.1 %). The share of students from other social classes was negligible.

Gender composition of the town's student body

The large number of students at the female school is testimony to the fact that no females attended the town's other educational institutions at the time. The gender composition of the student body in the town of Ostashkov in the period from 1852 to 1861 was as follows – 2,591 boys (57.5 %) and 1,917 girls (42.5 %). That was quite a large percentage of female students for the pre-reform period.

In addition, the town had an ecclesiastical school (Istoriko-statisticheskoe..., 1880: 23). Founded in 1751, it was housed in a building of its own and funded by the Ecclesiastical Department. In terms of annual expenditure on the ecclesiastical school, 979 rubles went to salaries and 178 rubles went to the upkeep of the building. In the decade from 1852 to 1861, the ecclesiastical school was attended by a combined 1,131 students. All of them were boys (R-v, 1863: 171). It was a four-grade school; its course of study was similar to what was offered in the primary grades of ecclesiastical seminaries (Matison, 2012: 9). However, the school closed down in 1758. It reopened only in 1772. When it reopened, it still had four grades, which were similar in curriculum to the primary grades of Tver Ecclesiastical Seminary. Ostashkov graduates could continue their education at Tver Seminary (Tverskie eparkhial'nye vedomosti, 1878: 118-120).

Institutions of culture and cultural life

As early as 1805, on the initiative of urban teacher M. Savvich and with support from merchant K.A. Savin the town became home to a public theater. This facility operated up to 1825. It resumed work in 1836 after an interval. In the second period of the theater's existence, its troupe consisted of several theater enthusiasts. While all plays were free, they could be attended only through invitation from the theater's actors. In 1838, the theater moved from a private home to a building of its own. By 1843, the building was fitted out with boxes and a balcony through funding from merchant S.K. Savin. In 1858, it had 11 boxes, 34 armchairs, and 52 chairs. Inclusive of the seats for gallery spectators, the theater could seat 450 people (R-v, 1863: 173). The troupe consisted of the town's residents, and its repertoire included plays and comedies. For instance, in 1860 the theater offered a play entitled 'Why Other People Get Married' and a melodrama named 'Séraphine Lafaille'. Note that in the pre-reform period theaters were a rarity in the country's uyezd and gubernia towns alike.

In 1833, the town became home to Ostashkov Civil Library. In 1856, it was renamed as Ostashkov Communal Public Library.

The town also had a couple of leisure areas – a boulevard and a public garden.

The boulevard was opened in 1850 in a commercial plaza. Local residents spent 2,000 rubles on its development. The boulevard, about 500 meters long, was lined with birch trees. It had red railings.

The public garden began to be developed in 1857 next to a cathedral church through funding provided by the town's Mayor. Thanks to a mild climate, by 1861 the park was expanded, with a

wind band starting to perform there on public holidays (which, likewise, was made possible through funding from the Mayor).

According to contemporaries, thanks to the relatively large number of educational institutions in the town, the fairly high level of literacy among its residents, the robust work of its cultural institutions (the theater and the library), and the fact that it neighbored the Baltic provinces (Estland, Courland, and Livland Governorates)¹, most of its residents were capable of “holding a conversation on just about any topic besides domestic and commercial matters... The high self-esteem and self-sufficiency of Ostashkov residents tend to produce a most favorable first impression on you when you first meet them. In fact, most Ostashkovites are naturally gifted individuals. Hence, there often are brilliant painters and wood engravers among them. The best testimony to their giftedness is that just about any worker at the local factory is both a musician, who is part of the factory owner’s band, and a decent actor, who won’t mess up his part in a play at the local theater” (R-v, 1863: 171-171).

5. Conclusion

On the eve of the abolition of serfdom in 1861, out of the town’s 10,876 residents 4,508 attended a civil primary school. A fairly large portion of the town’s population went to an ecclesiastical educational institution (although not all of those students were native residents of the town – some came from the uyezd). Some of its residents received education prior to 1852, including privately. Overall, around 6,000 residents of the town had a primary education on the eve of the abolition of serfdom, or more than 50 % of its total population. The high literacy rate was conducive to a corresponding level of culture (boulevards, gardens, public libraries, and a theater). These factors set the town of Ostashkov apart from most conventional uyezd towns in the Russian Empire.

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¹ The Baltic provinces were distinguished by the fact that nearly 100 % of their children attended primary school.

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