
This work is an interpretive essay that analyzes attitudes that tsarist officials and university professors held toward education in Russia from 1700 to 1917, and attempts to explain some of the results those attitudes produced in the early twentieth century. The book’s major thesis is that, although tsarist officials and “the academic intelligentsia” contested for control over educational institutions, they shared a preference for “Western-style academic institutions and the encouragement of pure research” that “may well have hindered the autocracy’s goal of maintaining the autocratic tradition intact, and the academic intelligentsia’s goal of a liberalized, enlightened Russia” (pp. xiii-xvi).

In the first half of the book, the author devotes two chapters to the “dilemmas” the autocracy confronted in attempting to maintain an educational system. The first chapter treats, in separate sections, “four basic attitudes” toward education that the author detects in the policies of the most important tsarist officials from 1700 to 1900. These attitudes were: 1) that tsarist officials must maintain a monopoly on reform initiatives and administrative control of education; 2) that an educational network constituted a real danger to the tsarist order in that it could transmit Western ideas into Russia; 3) that, despite the dangers education posed, Russia must maintain an educational system in order to compete in the international arena; and 4) that Russia was inferior to the West. That feeling caused tsarist officials to adopt Western educational and cultural institutions that had “remote utilitarian applications in Russia” (p. 5).

The second chapter analyzes pressures that were applied to the autocracy’s policy by conservatives, the liberal public, the needs of internal industrialization, and the international military situation from 1900 to 1917. Despite these pressures and an expansion of the educational network, especially through private initiative, the old system remained largely intact, the author argues. McClelland sides with those who opted during the period for emphasizing vocational training for the masses and is critical of the academic intelligentsia and “liberals” in the Duma and State Council who preferred a broader educational curriculum rather than merely vocational training for the elementary and secondary schools.

Part II (chapters 3, 4, 5) is an analysis of university professors’ attitudes toward education. Chapter 3 contains data on “the Russian professoriate” and argues that while politically liberal, the professoriate’s main demand in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were merely “for an educational framework in which they could . . . govern themselves and pursue their research unhampered by ideological or political constraints” (p. 71). Chapter 4 is a study of five members of the academic intelligentsia (A. V. Nikitenko, N. V. Speranskii, K. A. Timiriazev, V. I. Vernadskii, A. A. Kizevetter) to illustrate the variety of attitudinal types among the academic intelligentsia about their role in society. Chapter 5, on student radicalism, argues that the same factors that made professors a special sociocultural group (oppressive autocratic system, elitist educational network based on Western models, and the allure of the West) also made university students into a separate subcultural group in Russia. Universities and institutes “provided a refuge wherein a potent and influential student culture . . . could find a tenuous security and sustenance that was available nowhere else in Russia” (p. 115). Caught between student radicalism and the autocracy, the professoriate could not protect the university from either.

This work has the strengths and weaknesses of the genre of the interpretive essay. It stimulates our thinking about the questions discussed and will probably provoke us to undertake some of the research necessary to advance our understanding of those
questions. At the same time, it contains a dozen or so specific comments with which the specialist on any one of the topics discussed can quarrel. Eschewing commentary on the dozen statements, I use the space allotted to me here to discuss some basic assumptions upon which the author’s conclusions rest.

At the beginning, the author characterizes the curriculum of Russian higher educational institutions as abstract and only remotely useful for Russia’s problems. He prefers more practical courses and institutions. Unfortunately, nowhere does the book examine the curriculum of any department within any Russian higher educational institution, nor does it render specifically what is meant by a more “practical” or “vocational” curriculum or institution to illustrate this general characterization upon which much of the argument rests. When any allusions to curriculum are offered, they are to Russian universities. Whatever evidence such allusions provide (and it is little) is used not merely to characterize universities, but to characterize the vague set of “Western-style educational institutions” generally. The author makes no meaningful distinctions within the category of higher educational institutions between universities and the higher special institutes. The characterization of the university curriculum is accurate only if one makes the major exclusion of the medical schools and states serious reservations about the characterization of the curricula within other university departments. (Were Kluchevskii, or Miliukov’s courses on Russian history, for instance, less practical than mine or Professor McClelland’s?) But to ask the reader to accept the label of “abstract” or the function of “pure science” as accurate for all departments of all universities and all other institutions of the Russian higher educational network (from veterinary schools through electrical engineering, surveying, aviation, and mining institutes to the religious academies) is simply to ask too much without presenting a definition of terms or analyzing a few curricula.

Tsarist officials always made a clear distinction between the task of the universities and those of the special institutes. In fact, they wrote it into most of the guides to higher educational institutions at the time, e.g., D. Margolin, Spravochnik po vyschemu obra- zovaniu, 3-0e izd. (Petrograd-Kiev, 1915), pp. 35-37. The task of the universities was, as McClelland notes, “pure research” (chistaia nauka), but the tsarist officials always excluded the medical schools from the category (as many as 25 percent to 40 percent of the total student body, depending upon the year we choose—and two Russian universities had only medical schools for a long period). The officials always stated that the special institutes were for preparing people for the professions (professii or praktiki) (Margolin, p. 36).

In 1880 Russia had only eight universities in its fifty European and ten Polish provinces, but thirty-four special higher institutes (A. V. Dubrovskii, Statistika Rossiskoi Imperii, No. 8 [St. Petersburg, 1890]). By 1915 the numbers were eleven male universities, one private coeducational university, forty-three higher educational institutions (twenty-five for women, eighteen coeducational) that fit neither into the Imperial University nor Imperial higher special institute categories, and approximately 150 higher special institutes (Margolin, passim; V. I. Vorontintsev, Polnyi sbornik pravil priema i programm vyshikh. . . uchebnykh zavedenii Rossii, 4-0e izd. [Petrograd, 1915], passim). Mr. McClelland’s focus on the nauka function of the universities, then his use (with rare exception) of the terms “universities” and “higher educational institutions” interchangeably obliterate a crucially important distinction.

When the book focuses on the attitudes of tsarist officials and university professors, it performs a useful service. When it ventures into assessing results of those attitudes for Russian society and culture, it is of less value. But, not all of the problems of focus belong to the book alone. Scholars traditionally speak of “Russian higher education,” but analyze only the universities as though no other higher educational institutions existed. Mr. McClelland’s reliance upon the secondary literature has led him also