ARTICLES

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The Forgotten Minority: Women Students in Imperial Russia, 1872-1917

Because most Russian higher educational institutions (vysshie uchebnye zavedeni—VUZy) were closed to women before 1917, Western specialists have often assumed that little opportunity existed in Imperial Russia for women to obtain higher education. However, while denied access to state educational institutions before 1905, Russian women, aided by sympathetic professors, created educational institutions which evolved into full-fledged universities and medical, pedagogical, agricultural, and polytechnical institutes for women. During the last twenty turbulent years of tsarist rule, women were an important part of the Russian student body and an accepted, if not always welcome, part of the Russian educated elite. Women graduates, like their male counterparts, sought by working through state, public, and private institutions to improve the lives of the Russian people both before and after 1917; and they, too, played an active role in the various radical political movements and in the revolutions of 1905 and 1917.

The history of higher education for women in Russia is part of the broader history of the struggle by the progressive part of society to modernize Russia over the opposition of a state committed to the preservation of autocracy and


3. Minister of Education Dmitrii A. Tolstoi rejected petitions for women's universities, insisting instead on the terminology "Higher Courses for Women (Vysshie zhenskie kursy)," which left their exact status undefined. Even after recognizing these courses as equivalent to universities in 1911, the Ministry continued to reject all petitions to con-
its social bases. After the university statute of 1863 excluded women from the university lectures that they had begun to attend in 1859, Higher Courses for Women (the official designation) were established on the initiative of progressive society in the 1870s. Given the role of public rather than state initiative in founding these first higher educational institutions for women, it is not surprising that the state and conservative society distrusted both the idea of higher education for women and female students. Alexander II is reported to have feared that a potential assassin lurked within every studentka. The participation of two women in his assassination in 1881—albeit, not students—confirmed these fears, and all higher educational establishments for women were closed except the Bestuzhev Courses in St. Petersburg, which were now placed under a state-appointed director.

Although gradual advances were made after 1895, educational opportunities for women expanded rapidly after 1905 under the impetus of public activism unleashed by the First Russian Revolution. Between 1905 and 1915, the number of women's higher educational institutions increased from eight to more than thirty while enrollment of women students rose from 5,500 to at least 44,000. At this time law, engineering, architecture, agronomy, and commerce were added to the traditional humanities, medical, mathematics, and natural sciences faculties; and after more than forty years of exclusion, women again appeared in university lecture halls following the introduction of university autonomy in August, 1905. Although the government again closed university admissions to women in 1908 as part of a general policy of reestablishing state control over the universities, public and university pressure persuaded the government to admit women once again as students on a limited basis beginning in 1913.

While the struggle over women in the universities continued, a number of other higher educational institutions (VU3y)—state, public, and private—firm this new status by changing the names to “Women's University." TsGIA, f. 733, op. 154, d. 514, 11. 16-13. The Council of the Kiev Women's Courses proposed the "University of St. Olga" to complement the state "University of St. Vladimir."


5. Initially limited to the medical faculty of Tomsk University, admission was extended to other faculties and other universities upon the outbreak of World War I at the discretion of faculty councils. Pressure for admitting women came from Curators of educational districts seeking women teachers, from the medical profession concerned with the shortage of doctors, and from universities concerned about declining enrollment in certain faculties as well as from women's groups concerned with expanding women's opportunities. Tsentral'nyi gosudarstvennyi istoricheskiy arkhiv SSSR (TsGIA), f. 1276, op. 11, d. 1362, 11. 1-5.