

Forming Russian modern society: Role of higher education in the beginning of 20th century in Russia

► Alexandra Zhereb » [Newton University](#); email: zherebalexandra@gmail.com

* 1. Introduction

If we were to draw a picture of the Russian Empire in the first half of the 19th century, we would see a large continental country occupying 16 million square kilometers of land, stretching all over Eastern Europe and Northern Asia with a population of about 70 million people. Possessing a large number of diverse natural resources, a massive territory and a rather large population, the Russian Empire still remained an economically and socially backward country compared to other European states.

If we draw the same country less than one hundred years later, we see a totally different picture. Despite the change in name, political regime, social situation, and evolutionary socialists in the new country, the USSR managed to institute various fundamental economic, political and social changes (Barnett, 2004). The period of the second half of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century is considered one of the most debated parts of the Russian history. In history literature, there are radically opposite opinions about the development of Russia during this period. However, the majority of researchers agree that that was a period of modern Russian society formation, the society which we nowadays know as Soviet Union and Soviet people.

The aim of this article is to analyze the higher education system in Russia and its role in the life of Russian society from the second half of the 19th century to the 20s of the 20th century. Among the objectives of the study are the following:

- Analyze the role of the state and government in the system of higher education during the above-mentioned period.
- Analyze the changes in the higher education system after the revolution of 1917 and the formation of the Soviet system of higher education.
- Trace the possible relationship between changes in the higher education system and geopolitical, social and economic changes in the country.
- Analyze the functions of higher education in the above-mentioned period.

The central research problem, derived from the aforementioned objective, is as follows: In what manner and to what extent did higher education significantly contribute to the formation of Russian modern society during the period of the second half of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, taking into account socio-political changes and educational reforms, and how did these elements collectively shape societal structures and values during this period?



→ 2. Theoretical framework

The majority of classic modernization theories by Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, Emile Durkheim etc., see the formation of an industrial society, modernization as a process that goes along with industrialization, as a transformation of traditional agrarian society into an industrial one. They consider mainly such factors as the transformation of the economic system, technical tools and labor organization.

Therefore, in the beginning of the 20th century, sociologists expanded modernization concepts and involved such factors as the influence of cultural and mental transformations. These concepts are based on the affirmation that the process of modernization in its Western version begins with the transformation of various forms of social consciousness and culture. Among modern theories of modernization, there is a concept by the Czech-British philosopher and social anthropologist, Ernest Gellner (1925–1995). Ernest Gellner belongs among the few researchers who tried to create a global theory of the development of humanity, however, one of his primary interests was the transition from agrarian society and the formation of an industrial society (Musil, 2007). In order to understand the way this transition happens and what factors according to Gellner are inherent for an industrial society and how it differs from agrarian society, it is important to look at the following:

- An industrial society is based on economic and scientific growth rather than technological and economic stability as in an agrarian society.
- There are increases in social mobility and equality.
- The rapid change of technology brings a rapid change in the labor market structure.
- An industrial society cannot be based on the caste or status system. The social system should be at least partly meritocratic (gives people status or rewards because of what they achieve instead of their wealth or social position).
- The semantic nature of labor prevails and intel-

lectual jobs mostly replace physical jobs. These jobs require relatively time-consuming preparation (education).

- The role of universal culture is significant for industrial societies.
- The main characteristics of the transition from agrarian to industrial society are not just new economics and social culture, but also a change in the way of thinking and the constantly growing role of knowledge (Musil, 2007).

According to Ernest Gellner, an agrarian society with an agro-literate polity has specific features. One of the most important is the centralization of power where the ruling class forms a small minority of the population rigidly separated from the great majority. The ruling stratum can be subdivided into a number of more specialized layers: warriors, clerics, administrators, burghers etc. The most important is that both for the ruling stratum and for the various sub-strata within it, there is immense stress on cultural differentiation rather than homogeneity. The whole system favors horizontal lines in cultural cleavage, and it may invent and reinforce them when they are absent. Below the horizontally stratified minority at the top, there is another layer of the majority. The state is interested in extracting taxes, maintaining the peace and has no interest in promoting lateral communication and cultural homogeneity within this social level (Gellner, 1983).

Among the higher strata of agro-literate society, it is advantageous to stress, sharpen and accentuate the diacritical, differential and monopolizable traits of the privileged groups. The higher stratum is much more interested in differentiating itself from those below than in diffusing its own culture to them (Gellner, 1983). However, according to Gellner, the industrial society is the only society ever to live and rely on sustainable and perpetual economic growth, on an expected and continuous improvement. Furthermore, such a state of continuous improvement and growth could be reached only by possessing a totally new vision of the world as homogeneous, unitary and morally inert.

Also, part of the new vision and the continuous and perpetual growth is the idea that everything is open to rethinking, including human roles in the society. Roles become optional and instrumental. The stability of a social role structure is natural for an agrarian society and is incompatible with innovation and progress.

One more aspect of economics, which is directly connected to social roles, is the division of labor. Industrial societies evidently have a larger number of various jobs, and as a consequence, a larger number of different specialists assigned to each function. In spite of a greater number of jobs compared to an agrarian society, the distance between the specialists is far less great. According to Gellner, agrarian societies have two main groups: the major one represented by peasants who are mutually interchangeable in their social tasks and the minor group represented by specialists who are outstandingly complementary and dependent on each other and incapable of self-sufficiency. However, by contrast in an industrial society, the distance between specialists is much less. The author believes that the key point of such a division of labor is the educational process when – the major part of training is generic trainings, not specifically connected with the highly specialized professional activity of the person in question and preceding it. Although it is the most highly specialized society, an industrial society's education system is the least specialized and the most universally standardized. It means that in almost all levels of an educational system youngsters are given the same kind of education. Moreover, according to Gellner, such education plays an essential part in the effective functioning of industrial society (Gellner, 1983).

The universally standardized educational system is also linked to the concept which Ernest Gellner calls social genetics and which also has a significant role in the transition from agrarian to industrial society. In agrarian societies, the majority of the population belong to so-called self-reproducing units (rural communities where older and more experienced members pass knowledge and

skills to younger members, without relying much or at all on any kind of education specialist). At the same time, the minority of the population receives specialized training, and forms the special minor social class of full-time educators who perform services for the rest of the community: ritual, educational, therapeutic etc. There is one more social group, the clerks, who are a minor group as well and are very important. Clerks can read and transmit literacy and form one of the classes of specialists in society. Gellner believes that namely clerks form the majority of the labor force in an industrial society. Also, the meaning of work itself changes as well, – it is no longer the manipulation of things, but of meanings. The working process involves exchanging communications with other people or manipulating the controls of a machine.

Such a society, which is based on constant economic growth and depends on sustained and precise communication between members, must be thoroughly exo-educational: each member is trained by specialists, not just by his own local group (in general, such local groups often do not exist in an industrial society). This massive generic training might be provided only by a modern educational system, – a pyramid at whose base there are primary schools, staffed by teachers trained at secondary schools, staffed by university-trained teachers, led by the products of advanced graduate schools (Gellner, 1983). The educational system, which in an industrial society is big and indispensable, does not possess a monopoly of access to the written word compared to early stage societies. The structure of system becomes very complex and requires the maintenance of a large and expensive education infrastructure, which is quite costly for any organization other than the biggest one of all, the state. At the same time, only the state is strong enough to control such a crucial element of society. As the educational system becomes standardized and the state becomes the intermediary, education becomes the source of new universal high culture which is the same for all members of an industrial society (Gellner, 1983).



From the very beginning of existing sociology as science, matters of education, schooling and training were among the key questions for sociologists. The further development of the discipline brought different perspectives and approaches. Today, the sociology of education is part of almost any book on sociological theory. As the integral role of education in social life becomes more and more important in modern societies, sociologists analyze this role from diverse perspectives.

As sociology of education has attracted more interest from modern researchers and sociologists in the past decades, it is important to mention the ideas of the world's fifth most-cited social science scholar, Manuel Castells (1942), a Spanish sociologist who is mostly known for his research on information society and globalization. University education and the university's role in modern society are among his primary focuses. Castells believes that throughout history universities fulfilled different functions in western society. He divides all functions into two groups: the ones which were developed historically throughout the centuries and the ones which are inherent for contemporary society and were developed after WWII. For the purpose of this study, I will concentrate on the first group of functions. Castells starts with the first universities in Europe, which started as theological schools, and were producers of moral values and social legitimization. While non-religious schools had a similar function — imperial values in the case of some the major universities, of justifying domination, justifying western superiority in the colonial world. A second and equally important function of the first universities in Europe, according to Castells (as well as mentioned earlier by Bourdieu), was the selection of the elite and establishing social stratification. According to both Spanish and French sociologists, this function is far more important than all the others. The third function of universities was the training of a labor force. This function was particularly important for higher education institutions such as schools of medicine, law and engineering. Universities play a major role

in producing a quality labor force which was a key point for industrial development. The fourth function, which according to Castells, took roots in German universities in the second half of the 19th century, is the production of scientific knowledge. During a different period of time throughout history, these functions (or their combinations) played primary roles in the entire university system (Castells, 2009).

3. The system of higher education by the end of the 19th century in the Russian Empire

By the beginning of the 20th century, a system of higher education in the Russian empire was represented by 63 institutions of higher education which can be divided in two larger groups: governmental and private education institutions, was created in the Russian Empire. Most of them were not under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of National Education and belonged to other ministries and private companies. Governmental higher education institutions formed the foundation of the education system. The graduates of these institutions became officials for government services related to state administration, defense and ideological functions, and public education. In addition, they formed the majority of employees for city and local government administrations. Moreover, they became engineers and agricultural specialists for the non-governmental sector of the Russian Empire (Ivanov, 1991). Universities had a key position in the system of higher education with classic curriculum. Apart from universities, there were higher education institutions which did not possess the status of university but belonged to the university type of education.

The development of the higher education system in the Russian Empire started simultaneously with modernization and industrialization. By the beginning of the 20th century, the formation of the tsarist Russia higher education system was mostly complete. However, the results of the formation were not particularly optimistic. As of the first Rus-

sian census in 1897, only 21% of the population was literate. In 1897, the number of all university students was around 100 thousand higher-education institution students, and only 6% of them were female. Children of nobles and non-noble officials formed 73% of all students, children of priests formed 5%, children of urban class representatives were around 20%, and only 2% were formed by the children of peasants (Troinitsky, 1905). Despite the fact that all university statutes proclaimed no estate and status limitations, the restrictions in the system of primary education limited the number of young people who could continue their education at universities and other higher education institutions. Making significant progress and transformation in its size and structure, the system of higher education was not able to overcome one of the main problems, its estate orientation. It still produced and reproduced the elite. Higher education was not designed to conquer and overcome social stratification and inequality. According to Ernest Gellner, continuous improvement and growth could be reached only by possessing a vision of the world as homogeneous, unitary and morally inert, where everything is rethought, including human roles. By the beginning of the 20th century, the idea of rethinking human roles in society had just started to emerge. Another example is higher education for women and female students at universities. Considering the key position of universities in the system of Russian higher education, and the fact that until the year 1917 women were never allowed to become university students, can illustrate the unwillingness to rethink human roles in society. Another aspect of the social roles concept is the division of labor, which according to Gellner, is an essential part of every industrial society. University graduates mostly got positions in administration, teaching or continued with an academic career, however, as it was mentioned earlier during the last decades of the 19th century, specialized higher education institutions started to appear. The graduates who became specialized professionals were undoubtedly impor-

tant for the developing industries, however, the number of graduates was not enough to serve the needs of the growing economy. One more aspect of industrial society is education system indispensability and its large size and complexity. As a result, only the state can control such a system (Gellner, 1983). As mentioned above, state higher education institutions were formed in the system, and states tried to control and organize it by establishing various legal acts, including university statutes. However, the size of this system was not sufficient to satisfy the needs of the growing economy, and private education institutions were not able to completely fulfill it. According to British historian and political scientist Hugh Seton-Watson (1916-1984), the process of rapid and forced modernization has to begin by training a small group of the elite in modern skills and in a modern way of thinking. First, the elite are cut off from the traditionally minded majority, but during the process of modernization the gap between the elite and the rest of society can be narrowed. The speed of this process is defined by three main factors – the growth of industries, urbanization and the establishment of a nation-wide system of education with the last being the most important (Seton-Watson, 2004, 479–480). The Russian Empire succeeded in developing industries and partly in urbanization; however, the nation-wide system of education was never developed properly. The consequence was the enormous gap between the elite and the rest of society which first brought the system of education and then the whole country to economic and political crisis.

4. Russian Universities before and during the revolutions of 1905 and 1917

The turn of the 19th and 20th century is marked by the death of Tsar Alexander III on October 20, 1894. He was succeeded by his son, the last Russian Emperor Nicholas II. More intelligent and sensitive than his father, Nicholas II, however, in one of his first speeches in 1895, proclaimed that he de-



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voted all his strength and his reign to — to the good of the people, will protect the principle of autocracy as firmly and unswervingly as my unforgettable parent (Raleigh, 1996).

The mass student demonstrations against governmental control over universities started in the late 80s. From November 1987 till spring 1988, there were several demonstrations in Moscow, Kharkov and Kazan Universities. All of them opposed the new university regulations and inspectorate and governmental control over universities and students. However, these actions did not yet have political character. The government did not see a big threat from students and the only repercussion for students was stipendium cancellation. However, the political situation, development of underground revolutionary movements and governmental inactivity led to nationwide student strikes in February-March of 1899 (Shetinina, 1976).

In the beginning of March 1902, the Russian Student Congress took place in Kiev, where a manifesto was established, proclaiming the student movement a political movement. Students stated that university autonomy was not possible with the existing political regime and that the aim of the students was to fight against this regime (Trotsky, 1926). This manifesto completed the turn to the revolutionary movement. Students in different parts of Russia joined the movement, however, the most active were students from St. Petersburg uni-

versities and high schools (Petachenko, 2015). Student movements, student life and university education attracted the attention of famous scientists, pedagogues and activists. Many of them sympathized with the students and shared their ideas, supporting the idea of university autonomy. As the political and social tension across the country and especially around the capital got stronger day by day, more and more students, professors and academic workers got involved in political life. Many of them existed before, but in the beginning of the 20th century, the number of political activists among them started to increase rapidly. The majority of them were unofficial or underground, however, it is important to understand that during the revolutionary years, universities and high schools became centers of revolutionary movements and played a significant role in the upcoming changes.

The years 1904 and 1905 were marked by growing social, political and economic tension. The Russian defeat in the Russo-Japanese war showed the crisis of autocracy and was followed by depression and a negative public mood. As it oftenly happened in the Russian history, Russian military failure abroad had a major impact on politics at home. Sergey Witte, the leader of the Russian delegation at a peace conference, said: "It is not the Japanese who defeated Russia and the Russian army, but our rules, or more correctly, our childish governing of over 140 million people during recent years"

(Witte, 1922). From the beginning of 1905, the event which has become known as Revolution of 1905 started.

The events of 1905–1907 had a great impact on university life. From February 1905, students started to actively participate in demonstrations and other political activities. As a result, the education process was often interrupted, and many classes were cancelled.

Both students and professors, had different points of view about what role education institutions should play during a period of intense political crisis. The universities became open meeting halls for political parties, labor unions and other organizations (Kassow, 1989). It was at this moment that socialization political and social integration and networking became the primary function of universities and other higher educational institutions.

By February 1917, the Russian higher education system as well as the whole country was in a state of deep crisis. Russian universities and other higher education institutions were fenced off by estate-protective obstacles. Despite the fact that the university statute proclaimed no estate restrictions, the system of undergraduate education created the most favorable conditions for entering higher education institutions of people from noble-bureaucratic estates.

As mentioned earlier, by the year 1917, the higher education system in the Russian Empire as well as the political and social situation in the country were in a deep crisis. Here are some of the main characteristics of the higher education system right before February 1917:

- Higher education was only accessible for privileged social groups, forming the intellectual elite. According to the population census of 1880, 80% of all university students were the children of aristocrats, clergy, state officials. The labor class practically did not have access to higher education. In 1914, 3–4% of the children of workers and peasants studied at universities (Biyushkina, Kapralova, 2010, 5–39).
- The management of higher education institutions was multi-departmental. Universities were under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of National Education, and some specialized higher education institutions were under the jurisdiction of other Ministries.
- The majority of universities were located in Central Russia, which complicated access to higher education for the vast majority of the population. The management of higher education did not cope well with the task of the rational placement of higher education institutions in connection with the needs of the social, economic and cultural development of Russia. However, this situation started to change during the First World War when many higher education institutions were evacuated from the central regions and relocated in Eastern Russian (Ivanov, 1991).

The events of 1917 and the following years of the Civil War were undoubtedly crucial for the country. This period affected all spheres of social, economic, and most importantly, political life. However, it is difficult to analyze these changes to a certain extent. In this paper, I will focus mostly on the governmental management of higher education through legislation.

During the second half of the 19th century and the first decade of the 20th century, the Russian Empire faced various political, social and economic changes. The Russian government made a great effort to transform the country and society from agrarian to industrial but this aim was only partially achieved. The process to which the population of Russia was subjected can be described as fast, forced and deliberate modernization. Such modernization usually includes a transformation in three aspects – military, economic and cultural. By the beginning of the 20th century, Russian industries and economics became more sustainable and were mostly improving, however, they were not compatible with Western economies and the series of wars showed the economic underdevelopment of the country. By the time the government



→ realized how important and helpful the system of generic universal education for economic and social development would be, the Russian Empire was in a deep political and social crisis which would lead to the tragic events of 1917. In conclusion, by the beginning of the 20th century, the Russian Empire was still characterized by agro-literate polity with the ruling class forming a small minority of the population, rigidly separated from the great majority of peasants. Both of them, the ruling class, and the majority had a great cultural and especially education differentiation, which according to Ernest Gellner is one of the main features of an agrarian society.

5. The educational system transformation during first year after revolution

To support the feeling of the creation of a new society, the Bolsheviks showed a great capacity to exploit cultural change in the first years after the October revolution and made the lower classes the ultimate clients of both culture and education. The first cultural, as well as political and economic, transformations took place simultaneously with the backdrop of the developing Civil War, starting in February 1918. One of the immediate needs of the revolutionary years was to mobilize popular support, by means of agitation, propaganda and education. Propaganda was instructive and enlightening, aimed at establishing a deeper understanding of the goals of the revolution (Von Gellern, 2006).

Propaganda and agitation served the short-term needs, while education had a long-term effect and was able to create a new Soviet consciousness. Along with agitation and propaganda, the fundamental changes in the system of education represented the second stage of cultural transformation. It affected the education system (including university education) and its development on a class basis, the formation of new intellectuals, and the establishment of a new ideology based on the

Marxist-Leninist concept, which did not involve any connections with religion, discrimination against women or anything symbolizing tsarist Russia and the old regime. Understanding the crucial role of education in the new state formation and its long-term impact for the state's development, the new government established a significant number of laws and legal acts, which regulated all aspects of the education system.

On November 9, 1917, a decree of the Council of People's Commissars established The State Commission for Public Education entrusted with managing the education system in the country. Anatoly Lunacharsky (1875–1933), one of the revolutionary leaders, was appointed People's Commissariat of Enlightenment (Education) in the first Soviet government and remained in that position, which put him in charge of education among other matters such as culture, arts etc. Right after that, on December 15, 1917, the People's Commissariat for Education issued a resolution, according to which, the matter of schooling and education was transferred "from the spiritual department" to the Commissariat. This decree became a political and organizational prerequisite for the nationalization of higher education. Based on it, the People's Commissariat of Education (Narkompros, *печ — Наркомпрос*) in February 1918 announced the unification of all education institutions under its control. Nevertheless, starting from 1918, university education also faced crucial changes. As mentioned before, the power and importance of universities was quite high and after 1917 newly created authorities in many provinces decided to create their own universities. Many of these universities only existed for a few months. With the beginning of the Civil War, the process of establishing new universities slowed down. The first university, which was established by the Soviets, was Nizhny Novgorod University (May 22, 1918). Starting from 1918, the People's Commissariat of Education controlled all universities and education organizations. In addition, universities became a starting point for all changes and reforms which were made in the edu-

cation system over the next few years (Biyushkina, Kapralova, 2010).

One of the priorities of the Bolsheviks was the affirmation of a new ideology by separating it from Orthodox Christianity, the official religion of pre-revolutionary Russia. The decree on the separation of church and state and school from church (was a legal act adopted by the Council of the People's Commissars on January 20 (February 2), 1918 and came into force on January 23 (February 5) of the same year, on the day of official publication. This act proclaimed the secular nature of state power, declared freedom of conscience and religion, deprived religious organizations of any property rights and the rights of a legal entity.

Another important legal act was the Decree on compulsory joint education for both genders (рус. Постановление о введении обязательного совместного обучения). It was adopted on May 31, 1918 and existed until the year 1945. This decree aimed to overcome two important aspects of the old regime education system which the Bolsheviks considered to be significant problems for the future development of the education and the country in general. As mentioned earlier, women had relatively limited access to education, and the Soviets proclaimed gender equality from the beginning of their existence. The above-mentioned decree eliminated gender inequality in all levels of education. Another problem was the very low level of general literacy. According to the first and only Russian Empire Census carried out in 1897, the level of literacy was less than 24%. According to the census, there were 280 literate men and 131 literate women for every 1000 inhabitants. Compulsory education aimed to solve the problem of literacy for all social groups in the near future (Petachenko, 2015).

6. Conclusion

Undoubtedly, the Russian Empire's system of higher education, as well as many other elements in society, was built on social stratification. The cultural differences among all members of society were

still significant and the knowledge students received in different types of primary and secondary schools was incomparable. In Soviet Russia, management as well as control was centralized in the hands of the state. All elements of the education system were supervised by the state. Moreover, education had a — top-down approach, where the application of individual initiative in curricula was actively discouraged.

After the October Revolution and by the end of Civil War when Soviet power was established around the country, the Bolsheviks managed to culturally and politically separate Russia from European and Imperial Russian cultures and to start fundamental cultural transformation. Moreover, using massive propaganda, they managed to increase social interest in education. The main aim of cultural enlightenment campaigns was to bring further fundamental transformation in socio-political life using the gains of revolution as a starting point. The Civil War required significant human, financial and moral resources and was one of the most tragic events in the history of 20th century Russia. However, for the Bolsheviks, science, technology and Marxism-Leninism were crucial to make new Russia the modern state they wanted to see it. The first few years were about the basic yet essential preparation for the development of the new industrial and modern society based on and relying on sustainable and perpetual economic growth and on expected and continuous improvement. The most important impact of the creation of a massive standardized education system moderated by the state, is that education became the source of new universal high culture which is the same for all members of the society. Throughout the analyzed period, the system of higher education was constantly changing and adapting based on the changes taking place in society. Any kind of important and large-scale problems that society faced inevitably affected the field of education. Undoubtedly, the higher education system represented a sample or miniature version of Russian society as a whole.



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ABSTRACT

In the article author provides historical sociological analysis of changes in the system of higher education during the period from the second half of the 19th century until the 1930s in the Russian Empire and later on in the Soviet Union. By analyzing historical materials, legal acts and interpretations author also address-

es two important questions of the sociology of education. First one is what role plays education in the forming of modern society. Second is how the higher education institutions in general and Universities in particular reflect the changes in the society and adjust to those changes and how state and government affect the education in general. The purpose of this article is to analyze the higher education system in Russia and its role in the life of Russian society from the second half of the 19th century to the 20s of the 20th century. As theoretical framework author uses modernization theory of Czech-British philosopher and social anthropologist, Ernest Gellner (1925–1995) and his idea of education as source of new universal high culture which forms modern societies. Another theory which is also used in the following research is the ideas of modern Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells and his ideas of the role modern universities play in Western societies.

KEYWORDS

Russia; education; university; Bolshevik revolution; modernization; system of education

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