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Russian refugees at Belgrade University from 1919 to 1945: their contribution to science and teaching

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Abstract

In this paper, the history of immigrants is viewed focusing on Russian refugees who came to the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes after the October Revolution, in particular those who got employed at Belgrade University.

*The paper is a result of our broadly conducted research in connection with the publication of the reference book *Russian Refugees at Belgrade University Since 1919 – Who's Who*, which provides a summary review of their contribution to teaching and to the science of their new environment, and of the mutual influences of the two cultures.*

In an indirect manner, the paper also points out that university libraries, owing to the specific character of their collections, need to work on such projects in order to shed more light on the history of the universities that founded them, thus providing a basis for further research projects.

Introduction

Eighty-eight years ago, in 1926, Belgrade University acquired a building specially designed for a university library. Its task was mostly that of kindred institutions throughout the world: to procure and keep scientific literature and enable students and the teaching staff to use it. Today, the University Library *Svetozar Marković* in Belgrade has a collection of approximately 1,500,000 books and is the largest scientific library in Serbia and Montenegro.

Apart from scientific literature of current interest, very valuable and rare books, the Library has also been gathering specifically University-type materials, both published and unpublished: doctoral theses and master's theses obtained from our University (and other Universities as well), University calendars, lecture reviews, the annual reports of University Rectors, University bulletins, reports on appointments to teaching posts, commemorative volumes issued by the University and its Faculties – including both published documents and those copied for official use only. In this way, the University Library in Belgrade has formed an archive pertaining to the work of its founder, on the basis of which it is possible to conduct research into its many activities.

Within the framework of its more broadly oriented activities, aimed at providing detailed information, first of all, for the University population, the University Library compiles *A Bibliography of the Works of Lecturers and Associate Lecturers of Belgrade University* and *A Review of Doctoral Theses Defended in Serbia since 1945*. In addition to this, the Library has recently initiated a cycle of lectures and exhibitions entitled *The Legends of Belgrade University*, with a view to pointing out the most prominent lecturers of our oldest University by presenting their personal and professional biographies through printed and photographic material. The printed volumes and the exhibition catalogues provide interesting, highly informative and terse monographs about our University lecturers – world-renowned scientists. In an indirect manner, these publications acquaint the interested public with the history of our University and also popularise our science and science in general.

The select company of university lecturers we are dealing with, who have influenced our science or formed it, involves a great number of Russians. They found themselves in Serbia due to an unfortunate set of circumstances, settled down, found employment... Exactly how many of them were employed at the University, their names and surnames, what they lectured in, what their achievements had been before they left Russia and started their career in Serbia – all this has not been systematically researched until now. But let us explain who these Russians were and what this is all about.

Russian refugees

At the beginning of the 1920's, under the influence of the far-reaching political and social upheavals and transformations occurring in the Russian Empire, many Russians distanced themselves from the ideological one-sidedness of the Bolsheviks. They did not distance themselves from the promised idea of social justice but from the practice of socialism, which made them bitter enemies of the new ideology.

Following the Civil War (1918-1921), the greatest number of people ever recorded in history emigrated from Russia. They emigrated to a number of European countries, but at the time the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, ruled by King Aleksandar Karađorđević, showed the most understanding for these refugees. It gave them shelter for humanitarian reasons, but possibly more due to ideological reasons, as a form of empathy with the anti-Bolshevik attitude which formed the basis of this wave of refugees.

This heterogeneous group of immigrants numbered between forty and seventy thousand people. It was characterised by an exceptionally high percentage of people with University degrees and secondary school-level of education, which was probably the reason why they did not turn into a mass of expatriates lacking a political identity. On the contrary, they preserved their national, political and cultural identity, characterised by a rather firm spiritual-ideological unity. This coherent core gave them the strength not only to carry on with their

professional activities but also to focus on some new segments of the science or culture of the host country, without fear of becoming assimilated. That is how it was in Serbia, but also in France, Poland, Czechoslovakia and other countries that gave them shelter. (Unfortunately, with the advent of Communism in Serbia after the Second World War, a significant number of these intellectuals were exiled or had to emigrate again. Looking for a new home country again, many of them settled down in Argentina, where they continued their careers... Today, a number of their descendants live in this country, the host of the present Congress.)

The appearance of Russian refugees in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, decimated after the exhausting wars, represented a very significant spiritual (intellectual and scientific) infusion. It meant that the vacancies created in all spheres of life due to the fact that, in the course of the 1912-1918 wars (the Balkan Wars and the First World War), about 35% Serbs with University-level education were killed, were filled in professional terms.

In this paper, we focus solely on the attempt to analyse the contribution of Russian refugees to the development of Serbian science, first of all, within the framework of Belgrade University, in view of the fact that a great many of them were intellectuals, scientists, University lecturers, possessing a reputation in the native country and outside it as well.

The best testimony of their scientific potential is the fact that no less than eleven of them, soon after arriving here or some time after that, received the greatest scientific honour by becoming members of the Serbian Royal Academy, later the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Art.

The fact that the Genealogy and Local History section of this year's Congress deals with immigrants from a point of view that is close to our current research has made us very glad to be able to present a cross-section and a summary of our research and its findings so far within the framework of this paper.

In the context of our above-mentioned projects based on the documentary material of the University, we are currently working on the preparation of a reference book entitled *Russian Refugees at Belgrade University Since 1919 – Who's Who*. This volume will contain entries on all Russians connected with lectures at Belgrade University in the above period – Professors as well as assistants, lecturers, demonstrators, laboratory technicians (of whom there were few, though). Each entry will be made up of a photograph (if any), a personal and professional biography, a list of subjects taught by the person in question, and a selective bibliography. The basic criterion for inclusion is for the person in question to have been born in Russia. In this way, the knowledge of their active presence in our University circles will be systematised and completed at least to some extent.

In the 1919-1945 period, Belgrade University consisted of six faculties at the beginning, branching out to include ten faculties towards the end of the period. The newly arrived Russian lecturers started teaching the existing subjects for which there were no (or not enough) experts in Serbia after the wars. However, they also initiated the introduction of new subjects, which they used to teach in their home country but which did not yet exist here. They initiated the establishment of University and scientific institutes of the kind that existed in Russia, repaying the host country by broadening its scientific horizons.

The length of their stay at Belgrade University varied, depending on a number of circumstances, but many of them ended their professional career as well as their life here. That is why their share in the structure of lecturers at Belgrade University changed from year

to year. In global terms, it can be said of the above period (1919-1945) that Russian lecturers made up one quarter of Belgrade University lecturers.

Based on the data from the Annual Reviews of Belgrade University, lecture reviews, University calendars, the annual reports of Rectors, University bulletins, reports on appointments to teaching posts, commemorative volumes of some Faculties and other material in the possession of the University Library *Svetozar Marković*, we have managed to establish a basic list containing the names of the teaching staff, the subjects they taught, where they lectured, how their academic career unfolded, what sort of relationship they had with their students, what works they published. Searching for information about them as inhabitants of Belgrade employed at Belgrade University and financed by the Ministry of Education of the Kingdom of Serbia in the archives of faculties and scientific institutes, the documentation of the Archives of City of Belgrade, Serbia and Yugoslavia, the documentation of the Archive of Serbia and Yugoslavia, we have obtained information valuable for the history of our oldest University and for the history of the intellectual adaptation and development of this specific target group. Our research included lecturers teaching in Subotica and Skoplje,¹ for Belgrade University had its branches in these two cities.

At the Faculty of Law, which had 18 lecturers in 1920 and 38 in 1940, there were 12 Russians holding various professional degrees. They lectured on many key legal subjects such as: Encyclopaedia of the Law (L. Demchenko), Criminal Law (M. P. Chubinsky), Experimental Criminological Psychology and Psychiatry and Experimental Criminological Technique, which had not existed at this Faculty until the academic year 1929/30 (N. V. Krainsky and S. N. Tregubov), Roman Law (K. M. Smirnov), Slavic and Byzantine Law (A. V. Solovyev and T. V. Taranovsky), Church Law (S. V. Troitsky), Comparative Constitutional Law (J. V. Spektorsky), Administrative Law (S. Sagadin), Sociology (G. B. Struve).

At the Faculty of Philosophy, which educated experts in many fields in the 1920's – from philosophy, history, art history, philology to fundamental natural sciences – more than twenty Russian lecturers placed their invaluable knowledge at the disposal of our students. Particularly prominent among them was Georgy Alexandrovich Ostrogorsky, who was known throughout the world as an expert on Byzantology.

At the Technical Faculty, which, like the Faculty of Philosophy, educated a very wide range of experts in various fields such as architecture, civil engineering, mechanical engineering and electrical engineering, there were also more than twenty Russians.

The Faculty of Medicine was an exception at the time in that it employed rather fewer Russian experts than the other Faculties of Belgrade University (only four Professors and four assistant lecturers). Among these, however, the name of Professor A. J. Ignatovsky is world-famous.

Lectures at the Faculty of Agriculture were significantly improved by the invaluable knowledge and experience of 11 Russian lecturers.

At the Faculty of Theology, there were about ten Russian lecturers, and approximately the same number of them taught at the Faculty of Philosophy in Skoplje, whereas three of them taught at the Faculty of Law in Subotica.

¹ Now the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

It was often the case that Russian lecturers taught at more than one faculty; up to now, we have established that a total of 78 Russian lecturers taught at our University in the course of those two decades (as regards the period after the Second World War, the number of lecturers established so far is 170). Naturally, it is not the figures that are of primary importance but their scientific and educational influence, and it is there that they occupy a special place in the history of our science. What needs to be said in that respect is that, despite all the hardships, Serbia had University lecturers whose scientific reputation was high beyond any doubt and who have remained world-renowned to this day (J. Cvijić, B. Petronijević, M. Petrović, S. Jovanović, Ž. Perić, M. Konstantinović, M. Milanković, I. Đaja, B. Gavrilović). Having studied in Germany or France, they returned to their native country and were instrumental in its scientific advances. However, the contribution of Russian refugees, through the new sciences they brought along, the establishment of new scientific terminology for these new sciences, the founding of new institutes and scientific societies, the launching of new scientific journals, may be considered a most significant impulse to the development of science in these parts (even through no serious evaluation of their scientific work has been attempted), and we must be grateful to them for this.

They have made significant contributions to Serbian paleoslavistics (S. M. Kulybakin), legal historiography (F. T. V. Taranovsky), art history (N. L. Okunyeu), theology and religious philosophy (S. V. Troitsky and V. A. Moshin), as well as mathematics (A. D. Bilimovich), theoretical physics (V. S. Zhardetsky), mechanics (K. P. Voronyets), to name but a few of virtually all the areas of fundamental and applied sciences.

A multidimensional analysis of the refugee phenomenon, in its emigrational and immigrational aspects, is beyond the scope of this work; however, one cannot overlook the specific dimension of this “Russian sample” of ours. When, from a closer historical perspective, we consider the case of the Jews, Curds and our own citizens who, due to an unfortunate set of circumstances, were forced to flee their homes and emigrate to ensure mere survival, Russian refugees deserve our utmost admiration. Having to overcome existential, linguistic, social and untold other barriers, not all of them but a significant number of them still managed not only to retain the “imported” personal status but also to improve it and to make it felt in their new surroundings.² Owing to their spiritual strength, the great suffering that refugees invariably undergo metamorphosed into great achievements.

It would make my heart glad if Serbs, who have scattered throughout the world over the last ten years, as well as all other immigrants, managed to summon the same amount of inner strength in their new surroundings, first of all for their own sake, and left a legacy similar to that left to us by Russian refugees.

In 2005, Belgrade University will commemorate its 100th anniversary under this name. As its information service and database, the University Library *Svetozar Marković* wishes to contribute to the anniversary celebrations, making an effort to obtain complete information about a segment of its history. The most important page of the history of every institution is the history of its creators. We would like to fill a part of that page through our research into Russian lecturers at Belgrade University.³

² Beyond the boundaries of the University, they have contributed invaluable to our secondary school education, as well as architecture, painting, music, theatre, astronomy and aviation.

³ Within the framework of its publishing activities, the University Library published in 2003, in cooperation with the *Žagor* bookshop from Belgrade, the second, enlarged and revised edition of Jovan Kačaki's publication *RUSSIAN REFUGEES IN THE KINGDOM OF SERBS, CROATS AND SLOVENES AND YUGOSLAVIA – A Bibliography of Works 1920-1944 (449 pages, illustrated)*.

At the same time, on the basis of this sample, we can conclude that the interaction and mingling of cultures is the *differentia specifica* of all immigrant histories, and such an outcome certainly belongs to the fundamental values of mankind.