



Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program

Research Report

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Russia

Shaping a Post-Stalinist-Elite: Political Relations between the Soviet State and Students in Institutions of Higher Education, 1947-1965

Topic of Research:

My dissertation analyzes the formation of the postwar Soviet intelligentsia by studying student life in universities. I argue that the student experience fostered the reemergence of the Soviet intelligentsia in the post-war Soviet Union.

Approach and Methodology:

In the post-war Soviet Union, the intelligentsia was a social group subject to different interpretations and contending agendas. Two contrasting models or ideal types figure prominently in my analysis. First, the state fostered the notion of the "people's intelligentsia," a class of intellectual specialists characterized by diverse and often lowly social origins, an ethos of state service and strong emotive bonds with Soviet society as a whole. Second, there existed a notion of the intelligentsia as an autonomous social group whose intellectual and cultural skills provided it with a claim to privilege and political influence. Although these two ideal types were in constant tension throughout the Soviet period, university experiences in the 1950s-60s tended to shape generations of students in the direction of the second model of an autonomous intelligentsia. My dissertation

studies the conflict between the two models of intelligentsia social identity for university students and the process by which the idea and reality of an autonomous intelligentsia reemerged in Soviet society.

My research methodology represents my attempt to explore changes in student life and the dynamic of regime-*studenchestvo* interaction. My approach of tracing specific trends in diverse areas of student life, hopefully, will allow me to provide a overarching and detailed narrative of student life while maintaining an analytical approach throughout. So far, my project includes two case studies of Moscow University and Saratov University. In both research sites, I pursued my topic through a range of sources, including university-level archival documents, interviews with former students, and published memoirs and other sources. In addition to these case studies, I worked extensively in the central Soviet archives in Moscow in order to create a cross-regional picture of the *studenchestvo* as a whole.

Research agendas are a somewhat subjective and contingent matter in the humanities and social sciences. Nonetheless, I feel that perhaps my own experiences--both positive and negative--may be of some interest to at least some other scholars. I believe that the approach of studying changes in a social group over time has great potential for future application in the field Soviet history and especially the Khrushchev period. Narrowing down on a single social group--even one as diverse as the university *studenchestvo*--enabled me to develop some conclusions that I might not have made had I organized my research in a thematic or geographic manner. Moreover, it will enable me to avoid, I hope, some of the rather simplistic interpretations prominent in the literature on the Soviet intelligentsia during the "Khrushchev Thaw." Second, I highly recommend the research methodology of bolstering archival sources with interviews (of course this applies to more recent topics only). Although interviews are hard work and can be very frustrating, they allow the historian to build up a dialogue of sorts between different kinds of sources. I also highly recommend spending time outside of Moscow; I found my research trip to Saratov to be the most productive and interesting part of my year abroad, as it allowed me to study processes and phenomena that I had been reading about in the central archives in greater depth. In addition, I found that doing research in Saratov was infinitely easier than Moscow in terms of archival access, photocopying costs, and the willingness of people to spend large amounts of time being interviewed. In fact, I quite regret having spent so much of my year abroad in Moscow.

Preliminary Conclusions:

My central argument is that post-war universities as institutions influenced and shaped students in ways that were unexpected and unwanted from the perspective of the Soviet leadership. Most of all, there existed a contradiction in the social and intellectual position of Soviet students. Soviet student life was extremely regimented in terms of political oversight and a draconian educational system of mandatory lectures and rote learning. Moreover, Soviet education

was highly politicized; a large portion of student curricula were devoted to ideological training in disciplines such as political economy and dialectical and historical materialism. However, other facets of university life called into question the position of student as a loyal and passive receptacle of learning. University students had significant status as people selected to study in prestigious institutions in order to occupy critical social roles in the future. Moreover, free intellectual discourse was never stamped out in Soviet universities; in many cases, university teachers were trained in pre-revolutionary intellectual schools and retained significant autonomy from the communist party and ideology in the classroom. The process of socialization within the student body worked against the formation of students as passive subjects. In the rich associational life of students, the authority of official institutions for Soviet youth—especially the Communist youth league (komsomol)—was increasingly challenged by more independent social forms such as the friendly company (*kompania*). Finally, universities were institutions that transmitted intellectual and cultural influences from abroad, particularly via international students made up a significant portion of the student body in several universities. In sum, the milieu of the Soviet university encouraged Soviet students to try to transcend the passive social and intellectual roles set for them, a process augmented by the liberalization in Soviet life as a whole in the post-Stalin period (the "Khrushchev Thaw").

I analyze the role of universities in shaping the post-war intelligentsia by tracing changes in separate areas of student life from the end of the Stalin period in the early 1950s to the end of the Khrushchev period over a decade later. Some chapters will be devoted to clearly political issues: the critical reactions of some students to the official anti-Semitism of the late Stalin period, the influence of students from Eastern Europe on student politics in the 1950s, and the wave of political dissent and civic discussion following upon Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin's crimes in 1956. Other chapters will be devoted to analysis of less explicitly political systems of power relations in the Soviet university. I will devote separate chapters to the failure of state efforts to regulate student socializing in university dormitories, the liberalization of the system of planned job allocation (*raspredelenie* in Russian) for university graduates during the Khrushchev period, the increasingly vocal student discontent regarding flaws in the quality of university education in the 1950s, and the outcomes of the state campaign to expand socially useful labor for university students in the mid- to late-1950s. In all my chapters, I focus on the role of student social networks and the university intellectual ethos in encouraging students to challenge their intended roles as students, Soviet citizens, and members of the intelligentsia.

Although a few of the developments outlined have received attention in scholarly literature (especially in Russia), my study will have significant scholarly impact for two reasons. First, it will bring to light a number of topics that have received little or no attention by scholars, such as the job placement system, curricular conflicts of the period, or student productive labor. More importantly, in contrast to some studies that analyze students as part of broader entities such as Soviet society or

youth, my study treats the Soviet university student body or *studenchestvo* as a distinct social group with its own interests and contradictions. My focus on student social networks, status contradictions and the university milieu as a whole will enable me to draw a more subtle picture of the *studenchestvo* than has been previously available.