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IREX Research report

Topic of research

The topic of my research encompasses the development of sanitary medicine and hygiene science and medical professionals' relationship with the public in mid-sized provincial Russian towns in the late Imperial period.

The topic that I originally presented to IREX was a study of provincial urban society and the existence of a form of civic identity that served as social glue in Russian provincial towns in the late Imperial period. At the time I left for Russia, further preliminary research had led me to narrow that broad focus and concentrate on a particular segment of provincial urban society – scientific, technical and medical experts and their activity in local public life. This focus subsequently evolved over the course of fall 2000 into the topic of social history of medicine in provincial Russian towns.

My research over the course of my IREX fellowship examined the development of sanitary medicine, hygiene science, and public health and sanitary institutions in a localized, provincial context. The town and *guberniia* of Nizhnii Novgorod serve as my primary detailed case example, and this locale is supported by less detailed examples whose size and demographic tendencies in the late nineteenth century complement those of Nizhnii Novgorod and indicate common health patterns and moderately high levels of urban and industrial growth.¹

The broader set of questions upon which my project was based in the proposal stage – concerning social groups and their interaction, and processes of urbanization in towns of smaller size and less complex industrial function than cosmopolitan centers – continues to frame my examination of sanitary medicine and the priorities that shaped local agendas of disease prevention.

One other important aspect of my research that developed while working in Russia is my reliance on *zemstvo* materials for a large portion of my source material and my study of the *zemstvo* alongside the towns. I began my research in Russia with a wish to examine the relationship between the provincial town and its *guberniia* hinterland. As I worked I realized both the immense value of the *zemstvo* publications housed at the Russian National Library (im. Saltykov-Shchedrin, St. Petersburg – formally titled the Free Economic Society collection) as a source of historical information. I also came to see even more clearly the importance of the relationship between the *zemstvos* and the towns and the need to take both into account in a study of urbanization in the Russian Empire. One way in which my dissertation may eventually stand out among others from a methodological point of view is the examination I have made of *zemstvo*, town and *guberniia* (local MVD) administrative institutions in juxtaposition with one another. Most studies in the past have dealt either with towns or *zemstvos* in isolation, rarely the two together.

¹ By analyzing demographic figures for the years 1888 to 1897, I defined two sets of five gubernia-town pairs – a primary and a secondary group of locales for which I would gather information. The primary five supplemental examples are Voronezh, Ekaterinoslav, Samara, Saratov and Kherson gubernias and gubernia towns (in the case of Kherson gubernia, two towns are relevant for study, both the gubernia town of Kherson and the much larger *gradonachal'stvo* of Odessa). The secondary set of pairs includes Riazan', Simbirsk, Orel, Tver', Tambov and Vladimir gubernias and gubernia towns. To choose these two groups I analyzed three sets of figures: rates of natural population growth in the gubernias at large, levels of population density in the gubernias and their two densest uyezds, and the proportion of the *guberniia* populations living in towns. My goals in this were to identify *guberniias* with moderately high birth and mortality rates, as a general indication of health and peasant household habits; gubernias with a certain minimum population density, as an indication of peasant welfare and probable reliance on rural cottage industry; and *guberniias* where the densest and/or more urban areas did not stand out too starkly against a hinterland of very different conditions (i.e. sparsely populated and/or lacking in other towns).

Relevance and contribution to the field

I aim for my research to provide relevant background to the scholarly historiography on social stability and social relations in the later decades of the Russian Empire, to the scholarly literature on urbanization both within Russia and in general in urban studies, and also to the historiography of the social history of medicine in the late modern period. All three of these fields of scholarly interest are relevant to policy decisions and research and development today, but perhaps the greatest potential to have a direct impact on policy lies in the field of public health and medicine and their histories.

My dissertation will examine the strategies of medical experts and urban elites (primarily members of city dumas and local charity organizations) in the prevention of infectious diseases in the late Imperial period, using cholera and tuberculosis as two focused examples. In addition I have also studied the relationship between these educated segments of society and the urban and rural masses, the *narod*, especially in popularizing medical knowledge and hygiene education. A study of the background of the organization of the public health system in Russia and Soviet Union and of past strategies for dealing with infectious disease would appear to be directly relevant to one of the larger social issues concerning Russia and its international partners today – the current collapse of the public health system in Russia, very poor demographic trends, and the rise of infectious diseases from malaria and cholera to HIV/AIDS. In particular in reference to HIV/AIDS I have begun to take a much greater personal interest in the current situation, both in Russia and in the world as a whole, as the last year has seen the U.N. and World Health Organization give special attention to the problem of HIV/AIDS in the developing world and the related public health problems that this single disease tends to highlight.

Concise summary of your approach and research methodology, including a list of research sites

My research approach had two main avenues: first, the use of archival materials (from the central Imperial ministries, primarily from the MVD; and from the local provincial town and *zemstvo* organs, in this case Nizhnii Novgorod) as well as published materials to document the development of sanitary medicine and public health structures at the city and *zemstvo* level. And second, extensive use of journal and other periodical literature to examine the development of both medical expert and lay attitudes toward hygiene, sanitary and preventive medicine, the role of modernization (from industrialization and urban growth to rural migration and increased transportation in the countryside) in changing attitudes toward health in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

My research sites included the Russian State Historical Archive (RGIA), St. Petersburg; the State Archive of Nizhegorodskaiia oblast' (GANO), Nizhnii Novgorod; the Russian National Library (RNB), St. Petersburg; the State Nizhegorodskaiia Oblast' Library (NGOB), Nizhnii Novgorod; and the Library of the Russian Academy of Sciences (BAN), St. Petersburg. A future shorter research trip will allow me to consult selected holdings at the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF) and materials at the Institute of Social Hygiene, Economics and Public Health Management (im. N.A. Semashko), both in Moscow.

Summary of research findings and preliminary conclusions

At this very early stage of synthesizing my research notes, I feel comfortable making the following generalizations about my findings. I find that there was a qualitative change in how physicians (as well as other members of the general public) conceived of hygiene in the mid to late 1880s, and that this caused a change in approaches to disease prevention in the 1890s and later. I find also that those new efforts at disease prevention that are witnessed at the turn of the century tend to be based in a handful of physical sites, some of which I will most likely analyze in one chapter of the dissertation. And in partial agreement with existing studies that touch on medicine and social relations in the late Imperial period, I find that 1905 represents a watershed moment for attitudes about disease prevention and the

popularization of hygiene, if perhaps for different reasons than other scholars have chosen this year and its events as a crucial turning point.²

In regard to my research findings and the contribution my study may make to the more global literature on urban studies and urbanization, I hope that my study of Nizhnii Novgorod and other provincial towns will add to the literature on urban growth in “secondary” or peripheral, medium-sized towns in the modern period.³ One innovation that I hope my dissertation will contribute stems from the study of the interrelationship between towns and their rural hinterlands, as I have noted above in this report. As I indicate above, this is not simply based in my use of materials that shed light on the relationship between town and zemstvo, but in an attempt to improve upon the methodology of past studies of urban growth in late Imperial Russia.⁴

Suggestions for future research agendas and for the US policy community

The recently announced IREX fellowship to support collaborative research between American and Russian scholars that links the history of social and health conditions in the Soviet period and contemporary public health crises in Russia is an excellent example of one type of research support that will be very valuable in the future. Aside from the fact that this project touches on some of the contemporary ramifications of tendencies related to those I am studying in my dissertation, I see it as very important to encourage new kinds of collaboration between scholars and practitioners in the former Soviet Union, while continuing to support traditional social science research in the region. A project such as that of Dr. Brainerd and her colleagues ties historical research to active solutions for pressing problems facing the Russian Federation in a very exciting way.

² See, for example, Laura Engelstein, *The Keys to Happiness: Sex and the Search for Modernity in Fin-de-siècle Russia* (Ithaca, 1992).

³ See, for example, James R. Scobie, *Secondary Cities of Argentina : The Social History of Corrientes, Salta, and Mendoza, 1850-1910* (Stanford, 1988).

⁴ With reference to the specialized field of urban studies of late Imperial Russia, one example of a methodology which I found a very useful model, but upon which I aimed to improve is found in James H. Bater’s *Urban Industrialization in Provincial Towns in Late Imperial Russia* (Pittsburgh, 1986). Bater categorizes Russian cities strictly by their own population figures, an approach which takes no account of the demographic trends in a town’s *guberniia* hinterland. In effect, this serves to analyze the town in a vacuum apart from the rural area with which it is inextricably bound in its process of growth and modernization. My aim in choosing cases on the basis of population figures for both town and gubernia in relation to one another was to base my findings upon a more realistic conception of the important elements of urban growth.