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The History of Education

The Institution of the Rectorship in the Higher Education System of the Russian Empire in the 19th and Early 20th centuries: The Case of Imperial Kharkov University

Andrii E. Lebid ^{a, b, *}

^a Sumy State University, Sumy, Ukraine

^b Cherkas Global University, Washington, DC, USA

Abstract

This paper explored the institution of the rectorship through the case of Imperial Kharkov University, a classical (research-oriented) university that operated from 1805 to 1917 in Ukraine, then part of the Russian Empire.

The institution of the rectorship lent itself as a useful indicator of trends and transformations in university education in Ukraine and the Russian Empire as a whole. The findings revealed that there was a transformation in the functionality of the university rector from a mere appointee to a leader in the scholarly community enjoying a high level of public recognition.

A distinctive characteristic of the institution of the rectorship in the Russian Empire was its dual status – (1) representing university's academic community and (2) representing the state's bureaucratic machine.

The rectorship at Imperial Kharkov University was explored through the lens of the following key aspects: legal, organizational, ethnic, and social.

Keywords: rector, trustee, model of the university, classical university, Imperial Kharkov University, education policy, higher education.

1. Introduction

Kharkov University is one of the oldest universities in Eastern Europe. It was founded in November 1804 on the initiative and through the offices of nobleman V.N. Karazin, an Enlightenment scholar, whose name it bears to this day. All of the substantial funding required

* Corresponding author

E-mail addresses: a.lebid@socio.sumdu.edu.ua (A.E. Lebid)

for the establishment of this university was raised by the nobility (Bagaley, 1893–1898: 59-60). Funding was gathered not only in Kharkov Governorate but in Yekaterinoslav and Kherson Governorates as well. On his end, V.N. Karazin enlisted the support of Emperor Alexander I and gathered all the documentation needed to found the new institution of higher learning.

The university was officially opened in January 1805. The history of Imperial Kharkov University is an integral part of the intellectual, cultural, and spiritual history of the Ukraine of that period. The names of a number of scholars and enlighteners of global repute are associated with it (e.g., P.P. Gulak-Artemovsky, N.I. Kostomarov, D.I. Bagaley, and A.A. Potebnya). At different times, some of the world's most renowned academic and cultural figures became its honorary members and doctors (e.g., J.W. von Goethe, A. von Humboldt, I.Ya. Franko, L.N. Tolstoy, and P.P. Semenov-Tyan-Shansky).

A major center for the creation of Ukrainian national science, culture, and literature, Imperial Kharkov University played a seminal role in the emergence of the nation's first newspapers and magazines (e.g., *Kharkovskiy Yezhenedelnik*, *Ukrainsky Vestnik*, *Ukrainsky Zhurnal*, and *Uchenyye Zapiski*) and academic societies (e.g., Philotechnical, Mathematical, Historical-and-Philological, Physical, Chemical, and Legal).

2. Materials and methods

In putting this work together, use was made of a variety of sources dealing with the history of the development of university education in Sloboda Ukraine, capitalised in Kharkov. Specifically, these are the materials dealing with the development of the university space in the region (*Sbornik postanovlenij*, 1864) and the government documents establishing the norms and rules for the operation of Russian imperial universities and the rights and obligations of their rectors (*Akt postanovleniya*, 1802; *Polnoe sobranie*, 1830; *O pravah rektora*, 1868a; *O pravah rektora*, 1868b; *Dneprov*, 2017; *Utverditel'naya gramota*, 1805).

An analysis of the University Statutes of 1804, 1835, 1863, and 1884 (*Tablica ustavov*, 1901) helped gain an insight into the role and functions of the university rector in the system of corporate culture within the nation's higher education sector and in the bureaucratic system of the Russian state.

A major source of information about the university's rectorate was the lists of officers from the Memorandum Books for Kharkov Governorate (*Pamyatnaya knizhka*, 1862-1917), which provided a general insight into the organization and management of university education in the area.

Systematized data on the rectorate of Imperial Kharkov University were also drawn from the bibliographical publications (*Bogdashina i dr.*, 2012; *Istoriya*, 2004; *Prokopova*, 2004; *Russkij biograficheskij*, 1896–1913).

The study's methodological basis was grounded in the principles of objectivity, historicism, and analytical integrity. Use was made of both general and special historical research methods, including the historical-analytical method, classification and categorization, historical-logical analysis, the chronological method, the structural-systems method, and comparison.

3. Discussion

Exploring various aspects of the institution of the rectorship at Imperial Kharkov University is of considerable scholarly interest for conceptualizing the factors and mechanisms underpinning the development of the system of university education in Ukraine. Most of the articles, monographs and collections of documents that have been released up to now in conjunction with the celebration of the university's anniversaries (*Bakirov, Duhopel'nikov*, 2004; *HGU*, 1955; *HGU*, 1980) are only partially facilitative of a conceptualization of the rector's role and place in the system of management and education.

Therefore, it makes sense to classify the research on this topic into several thematic blocks. The first block is concerned with the research by Imperial Kharkov University rectors as members of the scholarly community. All of them held professorial positions before being appointed to (and some after stepping down from) the office of rector, engaging in pedagogical and scholarly activity. The published works that resulted from this activity provide insight into the rectors' contribution to the development of university science (*Mogilevskij*, 1817; *Komlishinskij*, 1817; *Ellinskij*, 1831).

The second block is concerned with the research analyzing the scholarly legacy of the university's rectors as members of the scholarly community (e.g., the philological legacy of P.P. Gulak-Artemovsky, the historical works of D.I. Bagaley, and the philosophical reflections of

A.I. Dudrovič). This research is crucial for conceptualizing their scholarly legacy and the scholarly potential of Imperial Kharkov University. However, it is little informative when it comes to describing their work in the actual office of rector, with most of the information it provides being scrappy and patchy (Levit, 1957; Kolomic' 2000; Slabkij, 1957).

There appears to be more value in what comprises the third thematic block – the obituaries. This material contains valuable facts about the lives of the university's rectors and professors and can give us an idea of their contribution to the development of the university as a whole and its various units in particular. We can also subsume under this group some other documents and sources on the history of Imperial Kharkov University, like reminiscences by contemporaries (Antonovskii, 1811; Astahova, 2004; Chirikov, 1876; Modzalevskij, 1909; Rechi, 1804-1911; Rommel', 1868; Wurzbach, 1856).

Worthy of a separate mention is the reference and encyclopedic literature containing information about the university's rectors as members of the scholarly class and a scholarly corporation and as members of the higher ranks in the Russian Empire (Potyomkin, 2019; Bagalej, Miller, 1903; Roslavskij-Petrovskij, 1841; Roslavskij-Petrovskij, 1850; Russkij biograficheskij, 1896–1913).

Certain aspects of the operation of the institution of the rectorship in the Russian Empire can be traced in the research investigating the country's system of higher education (Andreev, Posohov, 2012; Rossijskie universitety, 1998; Tomsinov, 2012), the development of its bureaucratic system (Posohov, 2017), and the development of its system of university education in a European context (Andreev, 2004; Andreev, 2009; Dement'ev, 2016; Tomsinov, 2009). Issues that are important for understanding the figure of the rector include legal support for their activity (Dneprov, 2017; Chernyh, 2011) and their relationships with other members of officialdom (Zhukovskaya, 2009).

The characteristics of the development of university education in Ukraine were explored in a number of research works focused on the organization of the educational process within Ukraine's university sector as a whole (Lebid, Shevchenko, 2021b). There are two studies looking at this process at Imperial Kharkov University, in particular (Lebid, Shevchenko, 2021a; Lebid, 2022).

The work by A. Lebid and N. Lobko analyzed several aspects of the institution of the rectorship (legal, organizational, ethnic, and social) through the case of the rectorship at the Imperial University of Saint Vladimir in Kiev (Lebid, Lobko, 2022). The findings from this research can be used in conducting comparative analyses of the subject in the future.

An insight into the general trends in the development of the system of education in Ukraine in the period under review was provided in the fundamental work by S. Siropolko (Siropolko, 2001).

4. Results

As mentioned earlier, the mastermind behind the establishment of Imperial Kharkov University was local nobleman V.N. Karazin, who at the time held the post of Secretary of the Central School Board in the Ministry of Public Education. The rationale behind opening the university was to help drive economic and cultural growth in the region. The university was seen as an institution of higher learning that could enroll graduates of educational institutions in Kharkov (e.g., Kharkov Collegium). A significant role in this matter was played by the proactive stance of members of the progressive nobility, such as V.N. Karazin, G.Ye. Donets-Zakharzhevsky, and G.R. Shidlovsky, and the edifying work of Ukrainian philosopher G.S. Skovoroda.

The city's government had provided a plot of land for the future university. The school had its charter developed (Ustav, 1805) and the foundation charter issued for it (Utverditel'naya gramota, 1805). Count S.O. Potocki was appointed the university's trustee and I.S. Rizhsky – its first rector. In the initial years of the university's existence, the bulk of its professorial and teaching staff was made up of foreigners. This was due to difficulty recruiting well-qualified staff domestically, with the school's administration left facing the issue of staffing its newly established academic units. In fact, at the time the university opened, half of the charter-prescribed vacancies for professors had not been filled. Therefore, at first there was often a need to hire foreigners. In the first decade, the university employed 29 professors of foreign descent, with 18 of these being Germans, 4 – French, and 7 – Slavs (Bagalej, Miller, 1903: 103).

Initially, Imperial Kharkov University had the following four divisions: Physics and Mathematics, Medicine, Philosophy, and Philology. By the start of the 20th century, it had the following four faculties:

Physics and Mathematics, History and Philology, Medicine, and Law. Subsequently, the following three institutes were opened at it: Pedagogical, Veterinarian, and Medical.

The newly established higher educational institution had an enrollment of 57 students, with 33 of these having state-funded tuition and 24 paying for education. Among its first graduates, produced in 1808, only 28 received a diploma. The low number of students attending the university in the initial years of its existence may have been associated with the fact that the lectures were conducted in Latin, a language not taught in high school and not spoken by most university entrants in the region at the time. Nevertheless, the number of students enrolling at Imperial Kharkov University increased year on year: 57 entrants in 1805, 65 in 1807, 72 in 1809, and 118 in 1811 (Bagalej, Miller, 1903: 104).

In the entire imperial period of its existence (1805–1917), Kharkov University had a total of 25 rectors (Table 1).

Table 1. Rectors of Imperial Kharkov University (1805–1917)

No	Rector	Specialization	Term
1	I.S. Rizhsky	Philology	1805–1806; 1808–1811
2	A.I. Stojković	Physics	1807–1809; 1811–1813
3	T.F. Osipovsky	Mathematics	1813–1820
4	V.Ya. Dzhunkovsky	Philology	1821–1826
5	A.G. Mogilevsky	Theology	1826
6	I.Ya. Kroneberg	Philology	1826–1829; 1833–1836
7	A.I. Dudrovič	Philosophy	1829–1830
8	N.I. Yellinsky	Medicine	1830–1833
9	V.S. Komlishinsky	Physics	1836–1837
10	A.F. Pavlovsky	Mathematics	1837–1838
11	A.V. Kunitsyn	Law	1839–1841; 1849–1850; 1852–1853
12	P.P. Gulak-Artemovsky	Philology	1841–1849
13	A.I. Palyumbetsky	Law	1850–1852; 1872–1873
14	K.K. Voigt	Philology	1852–1858
15	A.P. Roslavsky-Petrovsky	History	1858–1862
16	V.I. Kochetov	Agronomy	1862–1872
17	A.S. Pitra	Botany	1873–1881
18	G.M. Tsekhanovetsky	Economics	1881–1884

19	I.P. Shchelkov	Medicine	1884–1890
20	M.M. Alekseyenko	Law	1890–1899
21	G.I. Lagermarck	Chemistry	1899–1901
22	N.O. Kuplevasky	Law	1901–1905
23	L.V. Reinhard	Botany	1905–1906
24	D.I. Bagaley	History	1906–1911
25	I.V. Netušil	Philology; History	1912–1918

The institution of the rectorship at Imperial Kharkov University can be explored through the lens of the following aspects of its operation: legal, organizational, ethnic, and social.

The powers of the Rector of Imperial Kharkov University were regulated by *The Imperial University of Dorpat Establishment Act (Akt postanovleniya, 1802)*, *Preliminary Procedures for Public Education (Polnoe sobranie, 1830: 437)*, the University Statutes of 1835, 1863, and 1884 (*Tablica ustavov, 1901*), the Charter of Imperial Kharkov University (*Ustav, 1805*) and a few other documents (*O pravah rektora, 1868a; O pravah rektora, 1868b*).

As shown in our earlier research, the rector was under the significant influence of the trustee of the educational district. The rector served as a sort of intermediary between the Ministry of Public Education and the university (*Lebid, Lobko, 2022: 976-977*). It was quite common for educational district trustees to lobby for the appointment of university rectors. For instance, this was the case with the candidacies of I.S. Rizhsky and T.F. Osipovsky at Imperial Kharkov University.

In this context, it is worth noting that the trustee also “oversaw” issues related to appointing professorial and teaching staff at the university. For instance, it was on the recommendation of the trustee that the Board of Imperial Kharkov University “elected” V.Ya. Dzhunkovsky as an ordinary professor of Greek language arts. V.Ya. Dzhunkovsky would eventually go on to become the university’s rector. Another future Imperial Kharkov University rector, P.P. Gulak-Artemovsky, was appointed to the post of teacher of Polish “owing to the auspices of” the trustee, Count S.O. Potocki. Such practices were common throughout the university sector in the Russian Empire.

At the same time, the trustee also had the ability to bring about the dismissal of a person from the post of rector or professor. For instance, T.F. Osipovsky was relieved of the posts of ordinary professor and rector at Imperial Kharkov University “at the behest of” trustee Z.Ya. Katneyev (*Prokopova, 2004: 11*). Thus, it can be argued that, in essence, the role of educational district trustees boiled down to using informal practices to control the activity of university professors – so much so that they could interfere directly with the work of a university’s senior and middle management. However, as early as the University Statute of 1835, the functions of the trustee were formalized, incorporating him into the structure of the university as the top level of its administration.

The evolution of the system of university education in the Russian Empire can be characterized from the standpoint of the university’s transformation from an academic corporation to a centralized bureaucratic establishment. In this hierarchical system, the university rector was one of the links, being integrated into the bureaucratic model of management. Yet the post of rector being an elective position contravened the nation’s entrenched model of authority, with some educational district trustees even pushing for the government to discontinue the practice of electing rectors, as it “diminishes respect for one’s superiors” (*Petrov, 2003: 135*). In this context, a telling fact is that Kharkov University got its first elected rector (L.V. Reinhard) only in 1905.

The principle of electing rectors was breached widely at the time. There were cases where the powers of “suitable” rectors remained in place even after the end of their term in office. At the instance of the educational district trustee, such rectors would be appointed for a new term. It was common to elect rectors based not on one’s qualifications and credentials but one’s descent, family connections, closeness to the government, and social connections in town (*Andreev, Posohov, 2012: 296*). Quite often, the final say in electing a rector was with the Ministry of Public Education.

As regards the organizational aspects of rectors' activity, of particular interest are the following areas: the sphere of one's scholarly interests, one's work experience gained prior to being appointed Rector, and the age composition of the rectorate at Imperial Kharkov University.

As mentioned in our earlier research, while a candidate's specialty area did not matter primarily when electing or appointing rectors, most in the Russian Empire had a degree of Doctor of Law (Lebid, Lobko, 2022: 977). On one hand, this was associated with the fact that during that period faculties of law (alongside those of medicine) led the way in the size of both the teaching workforce and the student body (Lebid, 2022: 271; Table 2). On the other hand, it was the result of the bureaucratization of university life (Posohov, 2017: 124).

Table 2. Total Size of the Student Body at Kharkov Imperial University in the Period 1850–1881 (Lebid, 2022: 271)

Faculty	1850–1851		1859–1860		1869–1870		1880–1881	
	people	%	people	%	people	%	people	%
History and Philology	32	9	19	4	34	6	76	10
Physics and Mathematics	75	19	99	20	90	17	138	18
Law	122	31	148	31	285	54	114	15
Medicine	160	41	215	45	123	24	435	57

Out of Imperial Kharkov University's 25 rectors, 6 specialized in philology, 6 in the natural sciences, 4 in law, 3 in history, 2 in mathematics, 2 in medicine, 1 in economics, 1 in theology, and 1 in philosophy. Thus, Imperial Kharkov University did not follow the national trend of university rectors tending to specialize in law, unlike the Imperial University of Saint Vladimir in Kiev (Lebid, Lobko, 2022: 978).

There was another noteworthy trend. Most university rectors had had extensive experience working in an executive position before being appointed to the post. The primary factor in selecting a candidate was the bureaucratic component, as opposed to one's scholarly background.

It is worth considering the following statistics for Imperial Kharkov University: 23 out of its 25 rectors had held an executive position prior to taking up office (mainly, the posts of faculty dean and university board secretary). Six of the rectors had worked as a prorector (V.Ya. Dzhunkovsky, A.V. Kunitsyn, K.K. Voigt, G.M. Tsekhanovetsky, I.P. Shchelkov, and I.V. Netušil). Of particular note is the case of I.V. Netušil, who had worked as a member of the Board under the Trustee of the Kharkov Educational District.

The post gave Imperial Kharkov University rectors the opportunity for further career growth. For instance, after leaving office, M.M. Alekseyenko became the Trustee of Kazan Educational District and a member of the Third and Fourth State Dumas. N.O. Kuplevasky became a member of the Academic Committee of the Ministry of Public Education. D.I. Bagaley combined the office of rector with the post of councilor in the Kharkov City Council; he later was a member of the State Council from the Universities and the Academy of Sciences; he served as Mayor of Kharkov from 1914 to 1917. I.V. Netušil became a corresponding member of the Russian Imperial Academy of Sciences (Basargina, 2008: 557). As we can see, the career of most of the ex-rectors of Imperial Kharkov University continued in social, academic, political, and public policy environments – often in high-level positions.

Of particular interest is the age of the university's rectors at the time of assuming office. The youngest Imperial Kharkov University rectors were A.V. Kunitsyn, who at the time of assuming office was 32, A.I. Dudrovič, and N.I. Yellinsky, both taking up the post at the age of 34. The institution's oldest rectors were I.V. Netušil, L.V. Reinhard, and G.I. Lagermarck (62, 58, and 56, respectively). The average age of the university's rectors was 41.

Imperial Kharkov University was the alma mater of many of its rectors – 10 out of the 25. Its directors included graduates of other imperial universities – the Imperial University of Saint

Vladimir (2), Imperial Saint Petersburg University (1), and Imperial Kazan University (1). Some of the rectors had attended lectures at the Universities of Edinburgh, Göttingen, Jena, and Berlin. Some were graduates of Vladimir and Kazan Ecclesiastical Seminaries.

In terms of ethnic background, most of the rectors of Imperial Kharkov University were Ukrainians (52%), with the rest including ethnic Russians and individuals hailing from Hungary, Serbia, Czechia, and Finland.

It should be noted that many universities in the Russian Empire were under considerable German influence at the time, with instruction in them conducted mainly based on educational models used by German universities. Some of the professors invited to Imperial Kharkov University from foreign universities went on to become its rectors. Of particular interest is the case of A.I. Stojković, born in Ruma, then part of the Austrian Empire. He was invited by the Trustee of Kharkov Educational District, Count S.O. Potocki, to Kharkov University to fill the post of physics professor. Stojković took an active part in organizing the work of the university – he stood at the origins of the Physics Laboratory there. He was the Dean of the Physics and Mathematics Division before becoming Rector ([Inostrannye professora, 2011: 145-148](#)).

Another Imperial Kharkov University rector of foreign descent, A.I. Dudrovič, was a native of Hungary. A disciple of well-known philosopher J. Schad, he was characterized by some contemporaries as a person who “himself so lived as he taught others” ([Inostrannye professora, 2011, 2011: 89-90](#)), a phrase associated with the legacy of Ukrainian philosopher G.S. Skovoroda.

In terms of social background, the overwhelming majority of Imperial Kharkov University rectors, 40 %, were descended from clergy, with the rest representing, in equal measure, the nobility, merchants, urban commoners, and the military estate (15% each).

According to researcher S.I. Posokhov, the average length of service as a rector in the Russian Empire at the time was six years ([Posokhov, 2017: 127](#)). The figure for Imperial Kharkov University was 4.5 years. The way in this respect was led by V.I. Kochetov, who held the office for 10 years (1862–1872), M.M. Alekseyenko – 9 years (1890–1899), P.P. Gulak-Artemovskiy – 8 years (1841–1849), and A.S. Pitra – 8 years (1873–1881).

It is worthy of note that the role of V.Ya. Dzhunkovskiy in the office was taken over by A.G. Mogilevskiy following the former’s death in 1826. Incidentally, A.G. Mogilevskiy’s (5 months) was the shortest term served as Rector of Imperial Kharkov University.

This is a good example of the fact that not all rectors were able to serve out their term. The most common reasons included health issues, death, and legal troubles.

In this context, of particular interest is the case of A.I. Stojković, who was accused of “illegal commercial activity” and was eventually fired from the university ([Wurzbach, 1856: 142](#)). More specifically, there were complaints of A.I. Stojković engaging in behavior that made him “unworthy of the title of rector” – he was accused of repeatedly using most of the funding that he requested for ordering labware and books for the Physics Laboratory to “purchase red Hungarian wine and sell it to others”. He was also accused of selling master’s and doctoral diplomas. Attempts were made to sweep the matter under the rug. Stojković enlisted the support of the Trustee of Kharkov Educational District and the Minister of Public Education, with the latter directing that the investigation be discontinued due to “failure to substantiate the accusations properly”.

In terms of social status, of particular note are the highest distinctions awarded to the university’s rectors. All of the rectors of Imperial Kharkov University were holders of at least one of the following Imperial orders: the Order of Saint Vladimir, the Order of Saint Anna, and the Order of Saint Stanislaus. For instance, I.S. Rizhskiy was a recipient of the Order of Saint Anna (2nd class), A.S. Pitra – the Order of Saint Anna (2nd class) and the Order of Saint Vladimir (3rd class), and A.I. Palyumbetskiy – the Order of Saint Anna (2nd class), the Order of Saint Vladimir (2nd class), and the Order of Saint Stanislaus (1st class and 2nd class).

The following rectors held the title of distinguished professor at Imperial Kharkov University: T.F. Osipovskiy, V.Ya. Dzhunkovskiy, A.V. Kunitsyn, and M.M. Alekseyenko. The following were its honorary members: A.V. Kunitsyn, A.I. Palyumbetskiy, K.K. Voigt, and A.P. Roslavskiy-Petrovskiy.

5. Conclusion

The institution of the rectorship was approached in this work as a useful indicator of trends and transformations in university education in Ukraine and the Russian Empire as a whole, both in the academic and administrative arenas. The rector served as an important link in the hierarchical

bureaucratic system. The emergence of Imperial Kharkov University was another testimony to the government remaining true to its policy of building a system of Russian universities, which was manifested in the establishment of the universities in Kiev, Kazan, Odessa, Saint Petersburg, and other cities.

The Imperial Kharkov University had all the qualities of a classical (research-oriented) university, and the rector acted as a “patriarch” of the university’s values and traditions.

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