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## The Development of Women's Higher Education in Prerevolutionary Russia

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### Abstract

This work examines the development of women's higher education in the Russian Empire in the second half of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Consideration is given to the characteristics of the higher women's courses in the country's university cities.

Reference was made to a set of regulations relating to women's higher education in Russia issued in the early 20th century. The use of the fundamental principles of historicism, systematicity, and objectivity helped gain a proper insight into the development of women's higher education in the Russian Empire in the second half of the 19th and early 20th centuries.

The study's findings revealed that the development of women's higher education in the Russian Empire had several distinctive characteristics. A major role in this process was played by private women's educational institutions, more specifically the higher women's courses. Originating back in 1859, these courses were continually perfected and harmonized with the system of higher education under the purview of the Ministry of Public Education. At the cusp of the 19th and 20th centuries, this even helped establish in Russia the two women's state institutes. Overall, by the start of the 20th century Russia had in place nearly 25 different higher women's courses, with instruction in this sector offered across a variety of subject areas, including pedagogy, medicine, architecture, technical drawing, art and design, and technical and practical sciences. The new vistas of opportunity opening up for women with a higher education helped many of them become active participants in social life in prerevolutionary Russia.

**Keywords:** women's higher education, Russian Empire, higher women's courses, late 19th and early 20th centuries, women's pedagogical institute.

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### 1. Introduction

Women's higher education in Russia owes its development mainly to nongovernmental and private initiatives. Women were first admitted to university in Russia in 1859, when Saint Petersburg University began to admit women as non-degree students. In 1860–1861, similar processes took place in the universities in Kharkov, Kiev, and Odessa. However, as early as 1863, following the adoption of the University Statute of 1863, women were no longer allowed to attend a Russian university. However, demand for women's higher education in the country was so high that the first higher women's courses were soon launched. These courses would go on to play a significant role throughout the prerevolutionary period in making higher education accessible to women in Russia.

### 2. Materials and methods

Reference was made to a set of regulations relating to women's higher education in Russia issued in the early 20th century, including *Imperially Approved Report on Allowing Female Graduates of the Saint Petersburg Higher Women's Courses to Teach All Subjects in the Upper Grades of Women's Gymnasiums and Progymnasiums of September 25, 1901* ([Vysochaishe utverzhdennyi doklad..., 1901](#)), *Regulation of the Board of Trustees on Allowing Female Home Tutors Who Are Graduates of the Saint Petersburg Higher Women's Courses to Teach in the Upper Grades of Institutes of May 31, 1903* ([Polozhenie Opekunskogo soveta..., 1903](#)), *Proposal of the Minister Regarding the Rights of Female Non-Degree Students in Universities of August 1, 1907* ([Otnositel'no prav..., 1907](#)), and *On Evaluating Females' Knowledge Learned in the Program of an Institution of Higher Learning and on the Procedure for Granting Them the Academic Credentials for Teaching at a Secondary Educational Institution. Rules Approved by the Emperor on December 19, 1911* ([Ob ispytaniyakh lits zhenskogo pola..., 1911](#)).

The use of the fundamental principles of historicism, systematicity, and objectivity helped gain a proper insight into the development of women's higher education in the Russian Empire in the second half of the 19th and early 20th centuries.

### 3. Discussion

In recent decades, the history of women's higher education in Russia has been explored in both national and regional contexts.

The works considering women's higher education in Russia in a national context, most notably, include the work by A.Ye. Ivanov, focused on higher education in imperial Russia ([Ivanov, 1991](#)), the work by L.B. Chirkov, focused on the historiography of higher women's education in Russia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries ([Chirkova, 1999](#)), the work by R.A. Fando, focused on the "women's question" in the context of education in prerevolutionary Russia ([Fando, 2016](#)), and the works by V.A. Vremenko ([Veremenko, 2004](#)) and O.A. Patrikeyeva ([Patrikeeva, 2011](#)), focused on women's education in Russian universities.

N.F. Katsalova researched women's higher education in industrial engineering in Russia in the late 19th and early 20th century ([Katsalova, 2013](#)). L.M. Zotova researched women's education in early-20th-century Russia in the context of the demand for female specialists in the country's labor market ([Zotova, 2012](#)). In addition, of comparative interest is the work by T.V. Koroleva, which examines women's higher education and the women's movement in France in the 19th and early 20th centuries ([Koroleva, 2005](#)).

The works considering women's higher education in Russia in a regional context, most notably, include the work by Ye.F. Kuzminova and S.A. Nekrylov, focused on women's higher education in early-20th-century Siberia ([Kuz'minova, Nekrylov, 2006](#)), the work by L.T. Fayzrakhmanova, focused on women's higher education in Kazan at the cusp of the 19th and 20th centuries ([Faizrakhmanova, 2015](#)), the work by Ya.B. Rudneva, focused on women's higher education in Russia in the second half of the 19th and early 20th centuries through the lens of the system of education in the Kazan Educational District ([Rudneva, 2012](#)), the work by O.V. Melnik, focused on women's higher medical education through the lens of the Odessa Courses ([Mel'nik, 1912](#)), and the work by T.N. Kulikova, focused on women's higher education in the late 19th and early 20th century through the lens of the Guerrier Courses ([Kulikova, 2019](#)).

#### **4. Results**

The second half of the 19th century witnessed the launch of pedagogical classes at Russian secondary women's educational institutions with the aim of providing women with further education. The first such class was set up in 1859 at the Mariinsky School in Saint Petersburg. In 1863, the class was transformed into the Pedagogical Women's Courses, which would have a two-year program of study. As early as 1870, the school was split into two divisions – the Division of Philology and the Division of Mathematics. In 1879, the length of the school's program of study was extended to 3 years. Its curriculum was continually enhanced, and in 1903 the school was reorganized into an institution of higher learning – the Women's Pedagogical Institute (Vademekum, 1915: 7).

However, members of the fair sex in Russia were not happy with being limited to attending pedagogical courses and undertook a series of initiatives to boost the accessibility of higher education to women. In 1868, a collective petition signed by 400 women was sent to the Rector of Saint Petersburg University requesting that lectures and courses in various disciplines be organized for women. Concurrently, there emerged a similar advocacy group in Moscow. The matter was forwarded for consideration to the Minister of Public Education. As a result, females were permitted to attend public lectures that previously were accessible only to males. On January 20, 1870, Saint Petersburg became home to the Vladimir Courses. This school offered instruction in language arts and mathematics, with each course being of 2-year duration. A little earlier, on April 1, 1869, Saint Petersburg became home to a preparatory school for women intended to help fill gaps in a person's knowledge from secondary school and make it easier for them to comprehend the content of a professor's lectures. Beginning in 1870, similar schools began to open in other regions of the Russian Empire as well (e.g., Kazan, Kharkov, and Warsaw). Instruction in such schools was limited to lectures, and the composition of students attending these lectures was inhomogeneous in terms of education level. To this end, the Moscow Higher Courses for Women was launched in 1872. This school had a charter; it would also be known as the Guerrier Courses (Kulikova, 2019: 22). It was a private educational institution focused on providing female graduates of secondary educational institutions with the opportunity to continue their education. Instruction in this school was conducted by Moscow University professors. Gradually, the Guerrier Courses would take on the structure of a faculty of history and philology. Initially, the school's program of study had a duration of 2 years. In 1879, it was extended to 3 years.

The Kazan Higher Women's Courses was established in 1876. In 1879, the school was split into two divisions – the Division of Philology and History and the Division of Physics and Mathematics. In 1878, a similar school with similar divisions was opened in Kiev.

The Vladimir Courses in Saint Petersburg, closed in 1875, reopened in 1878 with a university curriculum and a new name – the Bestuzhev Courses. The first director of the Bestuzhev Courses was Academician K.N. Bestuzhev-Ryumin, who lectured in Russian history there. The school had three divisions – the Division of Philology and History, the Division of Physics and Mathematics, and the Division of Mathematics (which, beginning in second grade, had a program different from that of the Division of Physics and Mathematics) (Mel'nik, 1912: 73-74). The school's program of study had a duration of 3 years. In 1881, it was extended to 4 years.

The 1870s witnessed the emergence of women's higher medical education in Russia. Specifically, in 1872 the Saint Petersburg Women's Higher Medical Courses was established. At first, it operated as a school for training academic midwives. The school's curriculum was gradually expanded to match a university-level one, and the duration of its program of study was extended from 4 to 5 years. Those who completed their program of study would receive the title of physician. In 1876, the Women's Medical Courses was moved to the Nikolayevsky Military Hospital. It was in existence there up to 1887, when there was a change in the senior management of the Military Department. It, however, is worth noting that the Saint Petersburg Women's Higher Medical Courses was the first women's medical institution of higher learning in the world, i.e. back then there was no experience of this kind even in Europe.

All of the above-mentioned higher women's courses were established in Russia through nongovernmental or private initiatives. The schools were mainly financed by donations and tuition fees. Back then, the existence of private educational institutions largely depended on the demand for education. When the demand declined, such schools would close – to reopen at a time when a sufficient number of those willing to pursue higher education had been reached. Hence, the higher

women's courses sector was characterized by impermanence, with such schools often closing down, just like any private educational institution. In the late 1880s, the Ministry of Public Education closed, one by one, the women's courses in Saint Petersburg, Moscow, Kiev, and other cities. In 1889, a few years after the closure of the Bestuzhev Courses, the new higher women's courses was launched in Saint Petersburg. The new school had an upgraded charter, and there were changes in organization, with management of the school passing from the public to the school's director, who was given the authority to appoint instructors. The director was appointed by the Minister of Public Education. The public, in turn, was empowered to establish a board of guardians in an effort to obtain more funding for the school. The school also received a government subsidy to the tune of 3,000 rubles to fund the salary of the director. Curricula were the purview of the Ministry. Initially, the school had two divisions – the Division of History and Philology and the Division of Physics and Mathematics. In 1906, the Division of Law was also established.

On September 14, 1897, i.e. 10 years after the closure of the women's medical courses in Saint Petersburg, the city became home to the Women's Medical Institute. The regulation dealing with the establishment of this school came out back in 1886. There were solid reasons behind the opening of this institute – over the decade, not only had there been accumulated a sufficient number of potential students willing to attend it but sufficient funding had been raised too. Initially, it was believed that the institute would run solely on donations (by 1897, the school received nearly 700,000 rubles worth of donations) and tuition fees. The city provided a parcel of land for the school and let it use the Petropavlovskaya Hospital for its clinical classes. On May 10, 1904, a new regulation was adopted dealing with the institute. By this time, there had been substantial improvements in terms of the school's educational and material resources, making it possible to bring education in the institute up to the level of that in a faculty of medicine. The institute was empowered to perform tests and grant the diploma of Doctor of Medicine. The institute admitted females aged 19 to 28 with a secondary education who had passed an additional exam testing their knowledge of the curriculum of a male gymnasium. The school's budget was 229,000 rubles, of which 139,000 was from the Treasury. In 1911, state funding increased by another 75,000 rubles. Thus, as at 1911 the government took care of almost all the needs of the Women's Medical Institute in Saint Petersburg ([Vademekum, 1915: 11](#)).

On April 7, 1900, the Emperor approved the establishment of the Moscow Higher Women's Courses, whose operation was to be based on the same organizational design as the Saint Petersburg Courses. The school was opened on September 15, 1900. Initially, it had two divisions – the Division of History and Philology and the Division of Physics and Mathematics. In 1906, the school's third division – the Division of Medicine was set up ([Kulikova, 2019: 24](#)). The school was granted an annual government subsidy of 8,600 rubles to fund the work of its administration. However, most of the funding came from tuition fees, with each student paying 100 rubles per year and 50 rubles per term ([Kulikova, 2019: 26](#)).

In 1903, the Imperial Women's Pedagogical Institute was opened based on the Pedagogical Courses at the Saint Petersburg women's gymnasiums of the Office of the Institutions of Empress Maria. Pursuant to a regulation adopted on May 6, 1912, the institute was considered an institution of higher learning specializing in training female teachers for secondary educational institutions, as well as form teachers and home tutors. The school was managed by an honorary trustee appointed from among members of the imperial family. The institute incorporated a women's gymnasium, a primary school, a kindergarten, and a daycare center, which were used for students' practical classes. The school had two divisions – the Division of Philology and History and the Division of Physics and Mathematics. The school's program of study had a duration of 4 to 4.5 years and offered the following disciplines: divinity, philosophy, pedagogy, history, physics, mathematics, natural history, and foreign languages. The institute admitted female graduates of secondary educational institutions aged at least 16 years, with the selection process involving a review of one's prior academic performance and achievements. Graduates of this institute would be authorized to teach subjects that were their specialty in all women's secondary educational institutions, while those who had majored in foreign languages would be in a position to teach in all men's and women's educational institutions.

The Odessa Higher Women's Pedagogical Courses was established in 1903. It was transformed in 1906 into the Odessa Higher Women's Courses. The school was similar to the Saint Petersburg and Moscow Courses in the structure and organization of the educational process.

In light of petitions from regions across the country for the opening of higher women's courses in them, on December 3, 1905, the Minister of Public Education was authorized to establish private women's courses in them. That same year, women were granted admission to most Russian universities and other institutions of higher learning. Furthermore, there appeared mixed-type general education institutions, i.e. schools serving both males and females. The period following 1905 witnessed a marked upturn in the development of women's higher education in Russia, an area in which this nation was outperforming even Western Europe. All Russian university cities were becoming home to various organizations offering general and vocational education to women, with some of those facilities funded by the government. There was brisk development in the women's technical education sector, with instruction in it now offered across a variety of subject areas, including architecture, technical drawing, art and design, construction, and technical and practical sciences. In the period from 1905 to 1913, the Ministry of Public Education issued over 30 permits for the opening of various higher women's courses. As a result, 5 times more higher women's courses were opened in Russia in that relatively short period than in the preceding 40 years.

The nation's institutions of higher learning for women were established in the following chronological order: 1878 – Petrograd Higher Women's Courses; 1900 – Moscow Higher Women's Courses; 1903 – Higher Women's Natural Science Courses in Saint Petersburg; 1905 – Higher Evening Women's Courses in Kiev. In 1908, similar schools were established in Tiflis, Yur'yev, Warsaw, Kharkov, Tomsk, and Kazan ([Vademekum, 1915: 14](#)).

Virtually all of these schools had a 4-year program of study. Medical students would have to study for 5 to 6 years. The schools were mainly funded through tuition fees. For instance, this particular source of funding brought the Saint Petersburg Women's Courses over 400,000 rubles in 1909–1910, and it gave the Moscow Courses 519,000 rubles in 1911. These two schools led the way in the size of the student body – in 1911–1912, the Saint Petersburg Courses and the Moscow Courses had enrollments of 5,875 and 5,706, respectively. In 1911–1912, the women's courses sector in the Russian Empire had a combined student body of nearly 22,000 (25,000 inclusive of the student bodies at Saint Petersburg's Pedagogical and Medical Institutes).

Those years witnessed an expansion of the sphere of employment for graduates of higher women's courses. Ultimately, on December 19, 1911, the government passed the law *On Evaluating Females' Knowledge Learned in the Program of an Institution of Higher Learning and on the Procedure for Granting Them the Academic Credentials for Teaching at a Secondary Educational Institution* ([Ob ispytaniyakh lits zhenskogo pola..., 1911: 1-9](#); [Faizrakhmanova, 2015: 572](#)). The law introduced the title of secondary school teacher. Female holders of this title admitted to service at state-run schools would enjoy the same privileges in terms of salary and pension as males ([Ob ispytaniyakh lits zhenskogo pola..., 1911: 6](#)).

As mentioned earlier, in 1905 women in Russia were granted permission to attend universities and some other institutions of higher learning as non-degree students. This was fundamental to resolving the issue of women's higher education, in a sense calling into question the need to establish higher women's courses. Yet, even though women had been granted admission to universities, the number of places reserved for them there was insufficient. According to researcher O.A. Patrikeyeva, competition to get into a university was normally “3 to 4 times” more intense for women ([Patrikeeva, 2011: 181](#)). In May 1908, following the First Russian Revolution, first the Ministry of Public Education and then the Ministry of Commerce and Industry issued ordinances discontinuing the admission of women to educational institutions under their purview.

An important event in the history of women's higher education in Russia was the government issuing an ordinance on February 9, 1913, allowing female natives of Siberia to enter the Faculty of Medicine at Tomsk University beginning in the 1913–1914 school year. This was the only university in Russia that admitted women back then.

The First All-Russian Congress on Women's Education and the First All-Russian Congress on Family Education, both held in late 1912 in Saint Petersburg, raised the issue of equal rights for women and men across all levels of education. Eventually, the discussion of the issue of provision of higher education to women in Russia would temporarily be postponed as a result of World War I.

## 5. Conclusion

The development of women's higher education in the Russian Empire had several distinctive characteristics. A major role in this process was played by private women's educational institutions, more specifically the higher women's courses. Originating back in 1859, these courses were continually perfected and harmonized with the system of higher education under the purview of the Ministry of Public Education. At the cusp of the 19th and 20th centuries, this even helped establish in Russia the two women's state institutes. Overall, by the start of the 20th century Russia had in place nearly 25 different higher women's courses, with instruction in this sector offered across a variety of subject areas, including pedagogy, medicine, architecture, technical drawing, art and design, and technical and practical sciences. The new vistas of opportunity opening up for women with a higher education helped many of them become active participants in social life in prerevolutionary Russia.

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