Forum: The Elite and Society in the Russian Empire from Paul I to Nicholas II

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Abstract. The author reflects on the elite and society in the Russian Empire in the nineteenth through early twentieth centuries, in particular on the criteria for belonging to the elite; the mobility of the border between the elite and non-elite, and between different types of elites; the sources and mechanisms of elite replenishment; metropolitan and provincial elites; and related questions.

Keywords: elite, Russian Empire, eighteenth century, nineteenth century, early twentieth century

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Форум: Элита и общество Российской империи от Павла I до Николая II

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Аннотация. Автор размышляет об элите и обществе Российской империи. Среди вопросов для обсуждения – критерии принадлежности индивида или социальной группы к элите; условность и подвижность границы между элитой и теми, кто к ней не принадлежал, а также между разными типами элиты; источники и механизмы пополнения элиты; специфика столичной и провинциальной элит и иные вопросы.

Ключевые слова: элита, Российская империя, XVIII век, XIX век, начало XX-го века

The Russian administrative and estate elite: determining the composition and criteria for the inclusion of an individual or social group in the elite

The term “elite” was not widely used in Russia in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries nor did it have the same meaning as it does in this century. At the same time, definitions of “intelligentsia” by the end of this period appeared in hundreds of papers. P. B. Struve noted in 1909: “The word ‘intelligentsia’ can be used, of course, in various senses. The history of this word in Russian daily and literary speech could constitute the subject of an interesting special study” (1991, 138).

With a degree of conventionalism, one can say that definitions of this term occupied a semantic niche between P. D. Boborykin (who was at one time credited with having originated the term “intelligentsia”) and his supporters who argued that the intelligentsia is the “highest educated layer of our society” (Boborykin 1909, 130), and the *Vekhi*¹ point of view, which criticized the intelligentsia as the “product of the interaction of Western socialism with the specific conditions of our cultural, economic, and political development” (Struve 1991, 15).

Exactly twenty years ago, the author of this paper defended a doctoral dissertation on the domestic historiography of the intelligentsia (Samartseva 1999). Since then, thematic approaches to the historiographical and historical context of the nineteenth century have not changed much. Nevertheless, research boundaries have expanded, including through a series of conferences based at the Institute of General History of the Russian Academy of Sciences, the sociology department at Russian State University for the Humanities, the annual conferences on intelligentsia studies at Ivanovo State University, and others.

As to the Russian administrative and estate elite in the given period, it would be reasonable to assume that we are talking about a certain combination of high-ranking officials and most representatives of the nobility, the upper strata of the clergy, the growing financial and business strata, generals and senior officers, and others. The administrative-estate

¹ The journal *Vekhi* (Landmarks).

dimension aside, the so-called elite can be treated as the classic model of the “educated class” and include professors, eminent artists, and renowned professionals in various fields (medicine, technology, mining, etc.).

Thus, the administrative-estate elitism of the nineteenth through early twentieth centuries was determined by a disproportionate dependence on hereditary, proprietary, professional, and educational “parameters.” In some instances, upon appointment to specific posts, national, religious, age, psychological, and other factors were taken into account. Political preferences and the social status of the individual were also considered. It is not surprising that the administrative segment of the elite expanded somewhat over time due to trained professionals, regardless of their origin. Many researchers have studied these professionals without contrasting categories “intelligentsia” and “power,” instead interpreting them precisely as representatives of the intelligentsia. In this context, the question of an intellectual elite arises.

As for the sociocultural category historically perceived as the intelligentsia, and “educated class,” the realities of post-revolutionary Russia prompted even P. P. Struve to posit “if there is a Russian ‘intelligentsia’ as a number of educated people ...” as an open question (Struve 1990, 19).

Thus, the criteria for an individual or social group to enter both the “elite” and the “intelligentsia” depend to a large extent on a specific historical period and may vary over time.

Conventionality and mobility of the border between the administrative and estate elite

The borders of the estate elite in the nineteenth century was quite stable. It expanded mainly through the procurement of a noble title when moving up the career ladder. However, such “newcomers” faced certain barriers in the form of aristocratic traditions, making them feel some discomfort from the class “borderland.”

Nevertheless, by the beginning of the twentieth century, the administrative-estate elite of Russia had moved along a certain evolutionary path from a rather closed social group at the beginning of the century to a socio-professional stratum with unstable internal gradations, replenished by demanded representatives of different layers of society. Such categories as noble intelligentsia, higher clergy, and foreign experts in the Russian administrative-estate environment require special study.

Sources, pathways, and mechanisms of elite replenishment

The boundaries of and mechanisms for replenishing the elite and, to a large extent, the intelligentsia, are interconnected. In moving up the hierarchy, the conditional social elevator absorbed representatives of the nobility (in some cases, higher nobles), representatives of the higher clergy, and *raznochintsy* who showed the necessary talent and professionalism.

Thus, it is advisable to talk about the “plurality of elites” or, at least, the prerequisites for the formation of this plurality. At the turn of the nineteenth century, “general elite perception” includes not only government officials and the generals, but also professors at flagship universities, eminent jurors, and others. Recognized representatives of the artistic intelligentsia (artists, writers, actors) also became part of the elite or, at least, one of the elite groups.

A rather infrequent but interesting mechanism for replenishing the administrative-estate elite was marriage to a person of high status. This mechanism was less useful in the context of the scientific elite, where personal intellectual abilities determined the degree of involvement in the selected subgroup of the elite. The same applies to a number of areas of activity with a high degree of responsibility for decisions.

Identity of the Russian elite: forms and methods of identification, self-identification

The degree of belonging to the Russian elite was largely determined by aristocratic origin, the possession of a high position in the state, and/or an impressive wealth. The historically established features of the public mentality, in general, accepted these criteria of identity, but did not rule out the inclusion of individual representatives of all classes in the elite if they had outstanding professional qualities. A separate issue is the question of Christian ascetics who had significant moral authority over all sectors of society, and whose status was not dependent on title or wealth.

Back in the mid-1990s, at one of the thematic conferences, T. P. Belova expressed agreement with the famous Orthodox historian I. N. Ekonomtsev (Archimandrite John) in justifying the historical role of “the church intelligentsia, who also need to be recognized as the ‘first Russian intelligentsia,’ since they are connected with the emergence of personal self-awareness and the awakening of Russian national self-consciousness” (Belova 1995, 165).

A final note: depending on the specific historical circumstances, representatives of the wealthy strata of the population either considered themselves to be elites, or yielded this role to those distinguished by birth.

The noble character of the elite and the class elite of the nobility

In this vein, it may be productive to discuss the “cream of society” and the guarded noble traditions. However, this article will take a slightly different approach. One of the most interesting sources for understanding the essence of the Russian nobility are the “Notes” by A. T. Bolotov. Despite the fact that Bolotov considers a somewhat earlier period, the accuracy of his characterizations and the unique abundance of events are a real gift for the researcher. Without absolutizing subjective remarks, one can still pay attention to his attitude, the attitude of an encyclopedically educated person, the son of a poor landowner, and a nobleman who managed

a number of provinces under Catherine II. Thus, among the many hundreds of Bolotov's acquaintances were representatives of all classes. In a number of cases, he admired the engineering talents of factory masters, marveled at the education of a doctor, and supported an impoverished musician and considered him to be equal. Different cases have different specificity. To quote directly from Bolotov: "I galloped to the then glorious rich man, Nikita Akinfiyevich Demidov, the brother of the famous and glorious bounder Pronka Demidov, who was living right in the German settlement. Vladykin urged me to undertake this ride, assuring me that this man who was in correspondence with me desired to see and get to know me personally. I found in him a man who truly loved me even in absentia and not only accepted me very favorably, but also tried to entertain me in every way. He did not let me go without dinner and engaged in conversations about various things all morning that did not give me a slightest pleasure. For with all his enormous wealth I found in him a simpleton, a rich Cossack, showing through gold all the rudeness of his low nature from which he came to wealth and nobility. By comparison, I felt so much more pleased to see his precious and beautiful paintings and many other rarities that filled his entire house." (Bolotov 1872, 863–864). Bolotov did not rank all aristocrats and people of power in the intellectual elite. However, what he did admire about the "nobles" was their interest in science: Prince P. F. Golitsyn, Princes S. V. and P. S. Gagarin, Princess A. F. Beloselskaia, and others.

Metropolitan and provincial elites: unity in diversity

The term "aristocracy" is applicable to sketches about the metropolitan elite of the nineteenth through early twentieth centuries in many respects. With the coincidence of class, rank, and property criteria for membership in the elite, a higher bar prevails in its metropolitan variation. For example, a lumber trader in Vyatka province was honored by the local governor and was part of the provincial elite, but he was far from the capital level. At the same time, in the provinces, a schoolteacher and a parish priest were often perceived by different sections of society as intellectuals and the embodiment of a conglomerate of elitism and intelligence. The diary entries of a metropolitan student who had come on vacation to the Urals noted that the local medical assistant gushed about a number of wealthy and educated, but not titled friends: "They are intelligentsia!" For a local girl that sounded very much like "They are ministers!"

With some logical stretch, one can recall S. N. Bulgakov: "The intelligentsia is now no longer an estate, but a state, a modus of national life, the spiritual age of the people. And Russia has irrevocably entered the intellectual era of its history" (Bulgakov 1990, 125).

The role of education, culture and science in the evolution of the elite

An understanding of the need for education grew in the Russian society throughout the nineteenth century. The time of *mitrofanushkas*² had passed. The prestige of European education grew. M. M. Speranskii offered decrees on court ranks and exams for ranks. The quality of female education gradually increased. Public magazines *Nature and People*, *Knowledge and Art*, *Niva*, *Picturesque Review*, *Illustrated World*, *Homeland*, *North*, *Spark*, and *World Panorama*³ had subscribers even in the remote provinces in the nineteenth century.

The elite to some extent began to merge with the “educated class.” At the same time, the “intelligentsia” was prone to radical views. In his famous article, “The Tragedy of the intelligentsia,” G. P. Fedotov stated with a sense of regret: “In simple terms, the Russian intelligentsia is ‘ideological’ and ‘baseless.’ These are its comprehensive definitions.... a necessary and sufficient definition: the Russian intelligentsia is a group, movement, and tradition united by the ideological nature of its tasks and the groundlessness of its ideas” (Fedotov 1990, 408, 409).

We will not forget the “classics” of *Vekhi* with its bitter complaints that the “personal, family, and social [life of the intelligentsia] is ugly and inconsistent” (Gershenzon 1991, 86), and that it has no “internal discipline” (Kistiakovskii 1991, 129), that “the average mass intellectual in Russia for the most part does not like his job and does not know it. He is a bad teacher, bad engineer, bad journalist, impractical technician, and so on and so forth” (Izgoev 1991, 207). The ideological gap between the layers of society who sought their and the country’s place on the path to the development of science, education, culture, and the evolutionary improvement of socio-political institutions, and those who directed their knowledge toward radical transformations, gradually turned into an abyss. The ability to draw the right conclusions and make constructive decisions could have become the civilizational role of the Russian intellectual elite. This did not happen.

The elite and the “rulers of thoughts” (philosophers, writers, poets, publicists)

In due time S. N. Bulgakov, in the words of his Writer, emphasized that “the question of the intelligentsia and its spiritual destinies is truly one of the **cursed** questions of Russian life. I will say more than that: one or another of its solutions has a **fatal** significance in the history of Russia” (Bulgakov 1990, 125; emphases by E. S.).

Let us go back further into history. Somewhere in the depths of centuries the sources of the now established notion of “pre-intelligentsia” are lost. The birth of a new sociocultural community, such as the

² Mitrofanushka, an overwhelmingly ignorant yet opinionated noble youth, is a character in a popular Russian satirical play by Denis Fonvizin.

³ Original titles: *Priroda i ljudi*, *Znanie i iskusstvo*, *Niva*, *Zhivopisnoe obozrenie*, *Illustrirovannyi mir*, *Rodina*, *Sever*, *Ogonek*, *Vsemirnaia panorama*.

intelligentsia, is associated with the reformist activities of the first Russian emperor. We involuntarily recall Feofan Prokopovich, V. N. Tatishchev, I. T. Pososhkov, and others. Catherine II, aspiring to enlightened absolutism, explained to her subjects the ideas of Montesquieu and Beccaria, but chastised N. I. Novikov and A. N. Radishchev. Could it be otherwise?

The intellectual palette of the nineteenth century is charming: the philosophical poetry of A. S. Pushkin, the liberalism of M. M. Speranskii, the debates of the Decembrists, the dramas of P. Ia. Chaadaev, Westerners and Slavophiles, anarchists, socialists, communists, and others. Western theories and a domestic mentality have formed a special vector in Russian history, which at the beginning of the twentieth century was noticed by the authors of *Vekhi*. To a large extent, their conclusions were addressed to the intelligentsia, the hard-to-define category of society, which, according to the authors of the *Vekhi*, could destroy Russia.

Once the Russian authorities (among others) did not understand the danger of the *oprichnina* and endured the “Time of Troubles,” underestimated (among others) the consequences of a church schism and human fires started to burn, they failed to understand (among others?) the intelligentsia and spawned a revolution.

For any analytical consideration, the concept of “elite” includes a tangible share of identification with power structures. This does not contradict the principle of recognition of the plurality of elites: political, military, religious, scientific, economic, and so on.

The conflict of power vs. intelligentsia instead of power vs. elite played a crucial role in the fate of Russia. However, in the late twentieth through early twenty first centuries, in both historical consciousness and everyday vocabulary, the “intelligentsia” has come to be perceived by many as a kind of standard of morality, a bearer of cultural values, and a generator of progressive ideas. Does the concept of “creative class” replace the notions of elite, intelligentsia, or an “educated class?”

Maybe this author was not mistaken in noting that, in some cases, the intelligentsia is a multilevel, systemically unstable, sociocultural group, civilizationally oriented toward the formation of a mind strategy? (the term “mind strategy” is indebted to N. N. Moiseev (1990)).

Humanity lives on hope. The authors of the famous book *Limits to Growth* quite reasonably noted: “In the search for a sustainable world, it will take quite a while until even the most tough, rational and practical people, even those who have not been brought up in the spirit of humanism, talk about virtue and morality, wisdom and love, they will speak, at first with difficulty choosing appropriate words” (Meadows, Meadows, Randers 1994, 255).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, much was said about wisdom and morality across the social strata. Cruel decisions were made in the verbal envelope of virtue. But society, including the “rulers of thought,”

not to mention all the “factions” of the elite and intelligentsia, failed to find mutually acceptable solutions. A century of reckoning followed. Even so, certain conclusions were made, and the prospects in line with the healthy co-evolution of nature and society were defined. Will they be fulfilled?

P.S. A variety of Internet users are reposting the argument by Iurii Solomin: “But who is the current ‘elite’?” Isn’t it interesting? “I understand what are elite dogs or horses. I don’t know elite people. I know educated people. I know intelligent ones” (Solomin 2018).

Translated from Russian by Alexander M. Amatov

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