

The Higher Education of Women in Russia

Sophie Kropotkin

January 1898

THE Russian educated woman is known to some extent in this country for the part which she took in the struggles for political freedom. Very little is known, however, about the hard, and often really heroic, struggles which Russian women have sustained simply to obtain the right to a better education; still less about the wonderful organizing powers which they have displayed in the creation and maintenance of their educational institutions.

If women have to struggle hard for their rights in this country, one can easily imagine the resistance they had to overcome in a country like Russia, where, in addition to the same obstacles, an autocrat government puts a veto on every progressive movement.

Notwithstanding all these difficulties, Russian women win ground every year. They so well show, in their every day life, what an educated woman is worth, whether she carries on some profession or simply remains a wife and mother in her household, that even the autocrat government has to give way. And they succeed so well in their endeavors, that Americans who know how backward Russia is in matters of popular education will probably be astonished to learn how much has already been done in Russia for the intermediate and higher education of women; how considerable are the numbers of women who have already received university education; and to what useful account most of them have turned their knowledge. To bring Russian society, and especially the government, to acknowledge the accomplished facts, women had of course to go through many hard struggles, and these struggles I will attempt to relate as briefly as possible.

Every one knows what a stupendous intellectual revival took place in Russia after the Crimean war and the death of Nicholas the First. In less than eight years—1857 to 1864—the whole system of Russian life was entirely changed. The serfs were liberated, and peasant self-government was introduced. The rotten tribunals of old were abolished, and the institutions of the jury and justices of the peace (selected by all the householders of all classes) were introduced. Provincial assemblies were opened since 1864. A new spirit was infused in every branch of life. It was a wonderful time, when hundreds of quite new men, who formerly, with characteristic Russian timidity, only dreamed on the quiet about necessary changes, and only occasionally launched their ideas on paper for circulation among a few friends, came forward. In a few years many radical reforms were accomplished. The educational question certainly was not forgotten in the turmoil, and girls' education benefited in it largely.

The schools for girls were very few at that time; even in the well-to-do classes one girl only out of a hundred had the chance to receive some education at school. The few schools which did

exist were sharply divided between the different classes of society. There were schools for the daughters of noblemen, schools for the daughters of the merchant class, for the daughters of the clergy, for the daughters of the artisans, and almost none whatever for the toiling, "tax-paying" classes.

Most of them were boarding schools, as strict in their inner organization as convents. In the schools for the daughters of nobility, whereto only the selected few were admitted, the girls had to stay from six to nine years, entirely separated from their homes and the world. Never, under any circumstances, was a girl allowed to spend a few days in her home. Even in such cases as the death of a girl's father or mother, or some other very near relative, the girl was only brought to the funeral by a governess, and taken back as soon as the ceremony was over. Once a year, at Easter, they were allowed to take a drive in a long procession of carriages, which no relative dared to approach.

The program of education was, of course, in accordance with these principles. The girls lived like hothouse plants in quite a secluded atmosphere, far apart from real life, in a world created by their own imagination, and as different from reality as it could be. They were taught all sorts of accomplishments, but very seldom the voice of an earnest teacher appealed to their higher intellectual faculties.

The schools for the other classes of society differed by little; the pupils only stayed there for a shorter time and were taught fewer accomplishments.

The insufficiency of that sort of education was broadly felt, and already in 1847 and 1855 an attempt had been made to reform the schools. Now that everything was reformed in Russia, the vague aspirations of previous years were brought out in a definite form, in a memorandum addressed to the czar; and although the ideas expressed therein were diametrically opposed to the system which had hitherto prevailed, they were fully approved and accepted by the government. The first gymnasium for girls was opened in 1857; that is, only four years after the Queen's College in England had received the sanction of Parliament, and the necessity of a thorough education for women was proclaimed there; fifteen years before the public day schools began to be opened in England; and very nearly thirty years before the Lycees de Demoiselles were opened in France.

The leading feature of the new system was that the girls received an education nearly equal to the education given to the boys in the gymnasia. In all points it was thus directly the opposite of the previous system. From the beginning the girl's gymnasia were put on the same footing as the best institutions of that same class in western Europe. The teachers were chiefly men—the profession of a university degree being a necessary condition. The fees were 50 rubles a year, about \$25.

A demand for such schools came from all parts of the country, and the government encouraged both the demand and private donations for that purpose. Gradually high schools for girls were opened in each province—even in the remotest parts of Circassia and Siberia. The result was that at the present time there are no less than 343 gymnasia for girls in the empire, with no less than 80,000 pupils.

It seems almost incomprehensible nowadays that so deep a change should have been accomplished so suddenly—two years only after the death of Nicholas I; but it was fully prepared long before.

Women's education and the position of women in society had been eagerly discussed in Russian literature since the "forties" and early "fifties." In their earliest productions, Tourguineff,

Goncharoff, Herzen, Madame Hahn, and several others already gave a beautiful type of woman, well educated and taking to heart all the great questions which impassion mankind. In its leading men Russian society was thus won long ago for the women's cause.

The girls' gymnasia opened a new era for the Russian woman. The subjects were taught there in a serious and attractive way by university men; the girl's brain was really working. The contact between the different classes made a democratic spirit prevail in the schools; even the modest uniform—a brown woolen frock and a black alpaca apron—had its significance. A quite new sort of girl, who longed for a higher education, and often for an independent life, made its appearance. To obtain access to the university now became the watchword of this young generation.

The public at large was bewildered by the new movement. The reactionary press met the claims of the young women with great hostility; but the best men of the time, both in literature and in science, greeted in them a new era for Russia. Much paper and ink was wasted to prove, from the reactionary side, that a woman need not know more than to be a good housewife and a good mother; or that a woman's brain differs from a man's brain, and that, therefore, women must not be allowed to study what men study.

On the other side, our best writers,—much under the influence of the promoters of human beings,—John Stuart Mill, Buckle, Herbert Spencer, and many French and German writers, had an easy task to prove that the child, the husband, the home, and the community at large, can only gain from women's being well educated. Their writings inspired the young generation and gave them new forces for the struggle.

No great movement is due to one single cause, and so it was in this case. Three different sets of women, moved by different impulses, came to the conclusion that they must get access to higher education before any further steps could be taken. There were, first, those who wanted knowledge for knowledge's sake. The dull life of the genteel, ignorant woman, her mean ideals, her incapacity for educating her own children and for being her husband's friend and comrade, are so often the cause of unhappy homes, and this cause was so often indicated in Russian novels and our critical literature, that high-spirited girls made up their minds not to repeat, so far as it depended upon themselves, the unhappy lives of their mothers and grandmothers.

Another category of women were those who had been brought up for the idle life of a country squire's daughter or wife, but now had to earn their living themselves. With the liberation of the serfs in 1861, that idle and easy life was no longer possible, and the change was especially felt by the young unmarried women. Many of them had to leave their country homes and to look for some work in a big city. There they soon realized how terribly hard it is for an uneducated woman to struggle for life, and most of them joined the ranks of those who struggled for a higher education.

To the same category belonged those who had left their homes in order to escape from the despotism and immorality which stifled them. Formerly, a young woman saw no issue whatever in such case. She would have simply bent down before a despotic, and often corrupted, husband: she would have slowly died from consumption, looking with a broken heart upon her children being brought up in the poisonous atmosphere.

The most energetic fighters for higher education were, however, those women who came to the conclusion that the greatest happiness in life is to procure happiness and relief from sorrow for others. One of these, N. V. Stasoff, who will stand high in our modern history for the struggle which she carried on unremittingly for thirty-seven years for other people's rights, wrote truly in her Memoirs: "My own sorrow became the source of my happiness. I looked round and put

all my soul and love into mankind—and there happiness was.” The space of this article would appear much too small if I tried to give even short biographies of some of these women; but I must mention at least a few of them ; namely, Miss N. V. Stasoff, who died in 1895 at the age of seventy, literally at the work of her life; Madame M. N. Troubnikoff, who died the same year at the age of sixty, after a life given to the women’s cause, and to whom J. S. Mill addressed in 1868 that letter “to Russian women” which was read all over the civilized world; Madame V. P. Tarnovsky, Madame A. P. Philosophoff, and Madame E. I. Conrady, who stood foremost in all the struggles. Their struggles were not for education only, but for all that could alleviate the hard life of women.

The first and most natural step in that direction was to take advantage of every opportunity for getting admission to the universities. A few of the most energetic and promising young women were allowed, indeed, by some of the professors of the St. Petersburg University to attend their lectures as free-comers. These were the modest beginnings of a subsequent victory.

About this time (in 1861) several professors of the St. Petersburg University, disagreeing with the measures taken by the government against the women, opened a sort of free university, in the Municipal Hall of St. Petersburg, and their lectures were crowded by women. Great hopes were cherished at that time that an organized system of higher education for women would finally be obtained. But very soon all such hopes had to be abandoned. In 1862 the reactionary spirit gained the upper hand in the councils of the emperor. And St. Petersburg was closed for a year ; the free lectures were forbidden ; even the Sunday-schools were closed all over Russia. Tchernyshevsky—a brilliant philosopher and political economist, whose martyrdom is not quite unknown in this country—was transported to the mines in Siberia; as also Mikhailoff, his collaborator, another champion of women’s rights. The secret police had free entrance to the universities, and the entire atmosphere in the university became such that several of the best professors left never to return. Even the program of education in the girls’ gymnasia was found too extensive and was curtailed—in the natural sciences. In the press all discussion about women’s rights and women’s education was pitilessly stopped by the censorship.

Our women, however, did not silently bend before these persecutions; they simply, and without much noise, went abroad to study in the German and Swiss universities, which about that time opened their doors to ladies. A woman, as a rule, can live upon very little, and a Russian lady student knows to perfection the art of reducing her needs to a very low minimum. And yet it will be a puzzle to many, how could Russian girls manage to go through a five- or six-years’ course at a Swiss university, working hard, and having no more than twenty rubles—that is about \$10—a month.

A great impetus was given to the whole question by quite a personal step, taken by Madame Conrady. She seized the opportunity of the first Congress of Russian Naturalists and Doctors at St. Petersburg, in 1867, to address to that gathering a memorandum upon the necessity of higher education for women. The memorandum was read at a public meeting of the congress, and excited great enthusiasm, both among men of science and the public. The congress transmitted the memorandum, with its full approval, to the ministry of public instruction. No reply came for a full year. Then a new memorandum, covered this time by 400 signatures, was addressed to the dean of St. Petersburg University, Professor Kessler. The women asked the old dean to take their cause in his hand. All they wanted was the permission to open regular university courses for ladies in the halls and laboratories of the university, in the evenings or at any such hours when

they would not interfere with the work of the students. They undertook to cover all expenses themselves.

The dean's reply was very sympathetic, but it took almost two years to obtain from the ministry of public instruction the permission to make a public start. In the meantime the ladies organized a number of drawing-room lectures, in various parts of the town, for those girls who were not quite ready to begin university studies. Besides, in 1868, they opened pedagogical courses, with the idea of preparing teachers for girls' schools and of giving pedagogical instruction to future mothers, and these courses were soon attended by from two hundred to five hundred women.

At last, in December, 1869, the reply came. The permission was given to open, not at all a women's university, but "lectures for persons of both sexes" in history, Russian literature, physics, organic and inorganic chemistry, botany, zoology and geology, anatomy of man and physiology. The program of these courses had to be the same as in the university, but the full course in each subject had to be completed in two years. That meant even less than half a university. Nor could the lectures be delivered in the university, where the students might have had access to the laboratories. A censorship, which must be considered shameful even for Russia, was applied to those courses—the professors being placed under the obligation of sending detailed syllabases of their lectures to the state secret police. Very often they had to wait months before the approval would come. And finally, the students received no degrees and no rights whatever. This reply brought with it much consternation and disappointment; but, after a hot discussion at the general meeting, the ladies decided to accept the mutilated gift, such as it was.

At last on the 20th of January, 1870, the first of the "lectures for persons of both sexes" took place. The lectures had to be delivered in the evenings; and in order to do some laboratory work the students had to seek refuge in various laboratories, which could be had only on, Sundays when they were not wanted for their own students. And yet women flocked to these lectures; in the first year the attendance reached 740.

Knowing how poor most of the girls were, the yearly fee was reduced to about \$2.50, and yet many had to be freed from the payment of even that modest sum. The government contributed only \$500 a year. A society was consequently organized by the lady initiators to support the courses, but it was not allowed to raise public subscriptions through the press. All the business part of the courses was conducted by a committee of ladies, and a better organization of these matters could not be desired, although the number of students steadily increased, so as to reach 1,027 in 1889. These courses became a purely women's institution when they were removed, in 1874, to the lecture rooms of a girls' gymnasium whereto men had no access. Those who wanted to get a complete university education or a professional training surely could not be satisfied with these "lectures," and many women went to Germany, and especially to Zurich, where they could study and work at the university and at the admirable polytechnic school without any restrictions. Over a hundred Russian women were at Zurich in 1872; and how they studied may be seen from the most eulogistic memoir issued by the Zurich professors in defense of the admission of women to the universities. The Russian government received many a warning from different sides about the emigration of Russian women abroad, and it grew alarmed by the reports which it received from Zurich. The ladies there, it was said, came in contact with socialists; they became socialists and revolutionists, and joined the International Labor movement. Whereupon the government issued its famous circular ordering all lady students to return home within a year, and adding that those who should continue to stay at Zurich would not be allowed to pass any examination

in Russia. But while uttering these menaces, the government was bound to make at the same time some concessions, and it promised to organize university instruction for women in Russia itself.

It did not entirely deceive the women by that promise. In St. Petersburg, at least, the previously founded lectures underwent a transformation, and were reopened in 1878 under the name of “High Courses for Women.”

The institution prospered, and at one time it had more than a thousand students. The professors were highly satisfied with the students’ work, and on several occasions such men of science as Mendeleeff, the physiologist Syechenoff, the botanist Beketoff, and many others expressed their satisfaction in letters and public speeches. Public sympathy supported the courses, and the society for their maintenance grew every year. Quite a set of remarkable women came out of these high courses—remarkable for a scientific work they have accomplished as well as for the high aspiration of working for the good of the country which inspired them.

This was at St. Petersburg; but the same difficulties had to be overcome, and the same successes were realized, in other university cities.

In Moscow public courses for women were opened in 1869 by a few gymnasia teachers. Three years later Professor Guerie was permitted to open, on his own responsibility, high courses for women. All subjects which were taught at the university were permitted to be taught, on the condition that this should be an entirely private institution. In fact, the managing council was composed of women under Professor Guerie’s presidency, and all expenses were covered by the students’ fees and by private subscriptions.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Sophie Kropotkin
The Higher Education of Women in Russia
January 1898

Retrieved on 30th May 2024 from www.libertarian-labyrinth.org
Published in *The Nineteenth Century* vol. 43, no. 251, pp. 117–134.

theanarchistlibrary.org