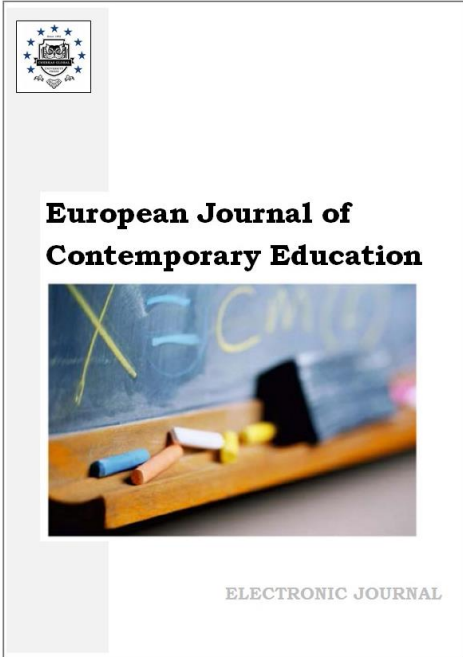




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Discussion of Geography Instruction in 1863 in the Kharkov Educational District, the Russian Empire

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Abstract

In the early 1860s, the Kharkov Educational District was a venue for heated discussions of practices for teaching various subjects. This paper analyzes a discussion around geography instruction that took place there in 1863 concurrently with a discussion around teaching language arts. The discussion was triggered by suggestions from a Kharkov University professor named S.V. Pachman that there was a need to have a link between the university and the gymnasiums. Following the publication of S.V. Pachman's statements in *Tsirkulyar po Khar'kovskomu uchebnomu okrugu*, a First Kharkov Gymnasium teacher named Spassky shared with the district's administration certain pedagogical ideas regarding geography instruction, which, he hoped, would find support among the university's faculty. All of a sudden, he had an opponent – another First Kharkov Gymnasium teacher, named Gadzyatsky, who suggested improving geography instruction via the use of completely different methods, ones of an ideological, rather than pedagogical, nature. A Kharkov University professor named A.P. Zernin acted as arbiter in the dispute. The discussion may be of particular interest to those interested in the history of Russian pedagogy and may provide a valuable insight into the daily pedagogical process in provincial gymnasiums in the Russian Empire at the time.

An analysis of the discussion revealed that in the early 1860s the system of teaching geography and language arts in Russian gymnasiums was undergoing brisk development. A shift was taking place away from rote learning with a focus on topographic nomenclature towards meaningful learning based on balancing the core learning material with supplementary literature, like journey descriptions and geographical essays (e.g., 'A Study of Trade at Ukrainian Fairs' by

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I.S. Aksakov). The emphasis was on engaging the attention of students and getting them to understand the extra material. Although the development of pedagogical practices for teaching geography in the Kharkov Educational District was not heavily impeded by the absence of a good textbook, there still were a few serious issues to consider, most importantly the irrational distribution of the course time for geography across grades (most of this time was accounted for by junior school, i.e. a time of limited cognitive abilities for most children) and the absence of geography as a subject in the university (as a result, geography was often taught in gymnasiums by instructors of dubious competence).

Keywords: history of pedagogy, teaching methodologies, historical pedagogical views, Kharkov Educational District, I.S. Aksakov, A.P. Zernin.

1. Introduction

As revealed in the article ‘A Discussion of the Practices for Teaching Language Arts Employed in the Kharkov Educational District in 1863: The Case of Novocherkassk Host Gymnasium’, the search for optimum practices for teaching language arts was discussed in the Kharkov Educational District in the early 1860s in fairly tough conditions (lack of funding, absence of appropriate textbooks, poorly qualified teaching staff, and poor student outcomes) (Peretyatko, Svechnikov, 2022: 983, 991-992). It was established that, in the face of all these difficulties, the district’s administration managed to launch a constructive discussion among ordinary teachers on how to deal with the key issues facing provincial gymnasiums (Peretyatko, Svechnikov, 2022: 982). Discussions of this kind are of great value in that they offer an inside look at education in a different era, with the focus being not on theoretical constructions and model classes but on mass pedagogical practice, with this practice assessed not in terms of conformity with certain rules and guidelines imposed from above but in terms of the effectiveness of those rules and guidelines for organizing the learning process in schools. In that same year, 1863, a similar discussion developed in the Kharkov Educational District around geography instruction as well. Through the prism of this discussion, the present article will reconstruct both the pedagogical views of ordinary geography teachers in the 1860s Russian Empire and the daily pedagogical process in provincial gymnasiums, including the organization of geography classes.

2. Materials and methods

Reference was made to the following materials emanating from the 1863 discussion on geography instruction conducted in the Kharkov Educational District: ‘A Note on Geography Instruction in Gymnasiums’ by Spassky (Tsirkulyar..., 1863b: 113-123), the opinion of A.P. Zernin on it, and the note by Gadzyatsky (Tsirkulyar, 1863b: 123-127). Use was made of the historical-descriptive method to reconstruct a general picture of the discussion based on these materials. The historical-comparative method was employed to match the opinions voiced on the matter against the outcomes of an inspection of gymnasiums within the Kharkov Educational District conducted in 1862 and against the materials from the 1863 discussion on language arts instruction conducted in the Kharkov Educational District.

3. Discussion

Although the discussions that in the early 1860s developed in the Kharkov Educational District around the teaching of the two subjects did so independently from each other, the two processes were similar – both were triggered by notes from ordinary gymnasium teachers addressed to the district’s administration. The author of the note ‘On Russian Language Arts Instruction in Gymnasiums’, a Novocherkassk Host Gymnasium teacher named A.M. Savelyev, did not specify the reasons behind writing it. All we know is that he just shared his thoughts on teaching the subject with the aims of getting advice and recommendation from his more experienced colleagues and raising the issue of the absence of a satisfactory textbook (Tsirkulyar..., 1863a: 66, 69-70). Evidently, he trusted the district’s officials and so felt free to speak out on fundamental failures, flaws, and gaps in his teaching (Tsirkulyar..., 1863a: 66, 67). A colleague of his, a First Kharkov Gymnasium teacher named Spassky (most likely, Vasily Lukich Spassky, a well-known pedagogue and opinion writer based in Kharkov between the 1860s and 1880s (Russkii biograficheskii slovar', 1909: 177)), wrote ‘A Note on Geography Instruction in Gymnasiums’. Spassky was clearer about his motives for writing his note, bluntly confessing that

geography teachers did “not have the means needed to carry out instruction properly” and so he wished to help straighten the issue out by acting based on the information provided in Issue 19 of *Tsirkulyar po Khar'kovskomu uchebnomu okrugu for 1862* (Tsirkulyar..., 1863b: 113).

Speaking of that issue, there is one interesting fact that is worth mentioning – Spassky was referring not to some administrative directive and not even to a pedagogical article but to a report by professor S.V. Pachman on the administration of examinations in Voronezh and Tambov Gymnasiums (Tsirkulyar..., 1862: 183-198). Never a professional pedagogue, S.V. Pachman actually was an outstanding lawyer with numerous fundamental studies on jurisprudence to his name (Pakhman, 1911: 408-409). Yet he approached the duty of administering gymnasium exams for the university more than seriously, with his reports containing, in addition to descriptions of the actual exams, a whole raft of ideas for how to improve the educational system. One such idea was that representatives from the university attending gymnasium exams should act not as scrutineers, for “any control more or less has the nature of restraining and paralyzing custody”, but as “intermediaries concerned with maintaining a steady solidary link between the university and the gymnasium” (Tsirkulyar..., 1862: 195). In S.V. Pachman’s view, under this approach, suggestions by the university instructors in attendance made during a gymnasium exam would draw a more animated, informal response from the teachers and serve, “if not as a trigger for immediate improvements, at least as one for discussing them” (Tsirkulyar..., 1862: 195). Note that this approach was close to the ideas propounded by Kharkov University professor N.A. Lavrovsky, a major pedagogue whose ideas with regard to reform of the educational system began to be actively applied at that time in the Kharkov Educational District. In 1861, *Tsirkulyar po Khar'kovskomu uchebnomu okrugu* carried a large article by him focused on adequate control in education, which concluded with the following words: “As the era of dominance of fear in schools is nearing an irrevocable end and the existing intimidation-based system is being supplanted by brief penalties, it is now time for the school inspector to stop being a lightning that punishes inequitably and start being a friendly guest who brings some refreshment to the routine-weary educational forces and inspires and leads them, a kindly guide between the remote school and the folks up top” (Tsirkulyar..., 1861: 19).

Thus, whereas one can only surmise that what inspired A.M. Savelyev to write his note, ‘On Russian Language Arts Instruction in Gymnasiums’, was the administration of the Kharkov Educational District paying attention to the concerns of ordinary pedagogues, with a focus on encouraging, rather than intimidating, them, it was definitely the case with Spassky. Not only was he an attentive reader of *Tsirkulyar po Khar'kovskomu uchebnomu okrugu*, including materials in it relating to inspections of other gymnasiums, but he regularly utilized some of those insights in his own work too. And it is actually based on the idea about the need for a “solidary link between the university and the gymnasium”, something that S.V. Pachman had proposed, that Spassky decided to speak out about the challenges faced by geography teachers in gymnasiums before the Board of Trustees of the Kharkov Educational District, which included university professors as well (Tsirkulyar..., 1863b: 113). Luckily, his hopes came true – not only did the Board not chastise the teacher, who was just being blunt about geography instruction being poor in all gymnasiums, including the one he taught at, but it went ahead and published Spassky’s note in *Tsirkulyar po Khar'kovskomu uchebnomu okrugu* in hopes of drawing to his opinion the attention of other practicing pedagogues (Tsirkulyar..., 1863b: 113).

What Spassky saw as the main problem with geography instruction in gymnasiums was the wrong distribution of subject matter across grades within them (Table 1).

Table 1. Approximate Distribution of the Geography Subject Matter Taught in Russian Gymnasiums Across Grades in the Early 1860s

Grade	Number of hours per week	Subject matter
1	3	General survey
2	3	Africa, Asia, Australia, Oceania, America
3	3	Western Europe
4	2	General survey of national geography

5	1	In-depth instruction in national geography
6	–	–
7	1	Revision

Note: based on data from *Tsirkulyar po Khar'kovskomu uchebnomu okrugu* (Tsirkulyar po Khar'kovskomu uchebnomu okrugu. 1863. № 13. P. 113).

One important terminological clarification needs to be made here. Spassky employed the term ‘national geography’. At that time, this term denoted in Russian gymnasiums the geography of the Russian Empire inclusive of certain independent regions. As will be shown below, a central place in Spassky’s criticism of the then-existing practices for teaching “national geography” was actually occupied by his condemnation of the failure to make use of the book on Ukrainian fairs, which he considered a good source. Therefore, the term employed in the present work in place of Spassky’s ‘national geography’ and ‘Russian geography’ is ‘geography of the Russian Empire’ (except in tables and quotes).

In Spassky’s view, methodologically, instruction in geography must include the use of “a descriptive and pictorial element” – in order to impart to the learning content “a charm of captivating freshness” (Tsirkulyar..., 1863b: 113). However, he also argued that there was no textbook in Russian available at the time that combined the right amounts of scientific and pictorial content – or, as he put it, served as both a “manual” and a “study guide” (Tsirkulyar..., 1863b: 114). Yet this was not the most serious problem to him, as pictorial descriptions of various places were available from supplementary literature (Tsirkulyar..., 1863b: 114). The real issue was the difficulty of covering the geography of the larger part of the globe in one single grade – Grade 2 (Tsirkulyar..., 1863b: 114).

According to Spassky, “things are even worse in Grade 3, where you get to travel through Western Europe with children who hardly know what a civilization is” (Tsirkulyar..., 1863b: 114). The key issue to him was not with having enough learning material but with establishing a link with other themes – above all, topics that had yet to be covered. For instance, in describing Paris, it would help to touch upon the French national character, as well as the city’s significance for both French and world culture (Tsirkulyar..., 1863b: 114). The situation was the worst with covering Germany, which still was a fragmented state at the time. According to Spassky, there was no way that a geography teacher could cover the characteristics of each German principality without getting into certain related historical events – something hardly possible to accomplish within the allowed timeframe. Hence, things would simply be reduced to rote learning (“Whether you like it or not, you are left with just one option – direct your students to memorize stuff in the book” (e.g., “Reichenhall is famous for its saltworks”; “Passau, formerly a fortress, is known as the venue for the Treaty of Passau (1552) and for its bridge with granite piers over the Danube”)), the only upside being that “it could, in a sense, benefit the history teacher – should the Peace of Passau come up, the student will have been aware where Passau is” (Tsirkulyar..., 1863b: 114-115).

Spassky’s primary concern was the teaching of the geography of the Russian Empire at the time. He noted at the very beginning of the corresponding part of his text that in the 1850s there came out many books concerned with the geographical characteristics of various regions across the country (Tsirkulyar..., 1863b: 115), enabling gymnasium teachers to make use of published works about formerly-little-researched regions. The work that appealed to Spassky particularly was ‘A Study of Trade at Ukrainian Fairs’ by I.S. Aksakov, which he described as distinguished by “masterly, brisk, life-breathing characterizations” (Tsirkulyar..., 1863b: 115). Spassky, who wrote about this piece of writing extensively and at length, matched its virtues against the way geography was taught in most Russian gymnasiums at the time. For instance, he observed that right after the release of I.S. Aksakov’s book in 1858 (Aksakov, 1858) there came out as many as nine textbooks in geography, all primarily concerned with cities, giving a misleading impression of “a high degree of urban centralization in Russia” (Tsirkulyar..., 1863b: 116). Spassky complained of the textbooks’ insufficient focus on folk life. He particularly condemned the absence in any of them of mention of the business of buying farm products wholesale from peasants and selling them after (‘prasolstvo’ in Russian), which he considered a vivid manifestation of the country’s distinctive geographical characteristics and a consequence of “the population being scattered over large areas” (Tsirkulyar..., 1863b: 116).

What Spassky saw as no less important a virtue of ‘A Study of Trade at Ukrainian Fairs’ was that it provided characterizations of various population groups in the Russian Empire (“It contains superb characterizations of all kinds of vendors, across ethnicities and social estates, from Jews to sloboda dwellers, peddlers, self-employed transporters, and so on” (Tsirkulyar..., 1863b: 116)). Unfortunately, the text was written in a somewhat emotional, and even haphazard, manner, and Spassky offers no conclusion as to how it could be employed in teaching geography. Nevertheless, Spassky concluded his speculations by stressing that this and other books on the geography and ethnography of regions of the Russian Empire released in the 1850s must be used by gymnasium teachers (Tsirkulyar..., 1863b: 117). He singled out the following materials as deserving special attention: materials from the Russian Geographical Society, the anonymous ‘Essays on the Pechory Region’ (Ocherki Pecherskogo kraya, 1858) and ‘Essays on the Transural Steppe and the Inner, or Bukey, Horde’ (Ocherki Zaural'skoi stepi..., 1859), both released by the publishing house run by K.T. Soldatenkov and N.M. Shchepkin, and ‘Physical and Ethnographical Characteristics of European Russia’ by V.I. Lyadov (Lyadov, 1861) (Tsirkulyar..., 1863b: 115-117).

Thus, Spassky believed that, although in the early 1860s there had yet to be produced a good textbook in geography with an appropriate combination of scholarly and pictorial content, there were a whole range of relatively fresh books available in Russia that gymnasium teachers could put to efficient use in teaching the geography of the Russian Empire. However, this, again, was hampered by insufficient learning time, especially in Grade 5, where students were to receive in-depth instruction in the geography of the Russian Empire (“We cannot avail of all this wealth, when there is only one lecture in the course in Grade 5, can we?! ... Whether they like it or not, the teacher is just left with the option of marking out a certain passage in the textbook and concluding the lecture with the proverbial “memorize it from here up to here” (Tsirkulyar..., 1863b: 117).

In Spassky’s view, the situation with geography was the worst in Grades 6 and 7. Grade 7 did not teach geography, so “all that was learnt with so much difficulty in previous grades would be just gone in one year” (Tsirkulyar..., 1863b: 117). Therefore, he argued, in Grade 7 the course material would have to be not revised but “learnt over again”, but with much less success now (Tsirkulyar..., 1863b: 117). According to Spassky, while these issues with geography instruction had always been there, formerly they were not as palpitating, inasmuch as it was not clear what and how to teach, with geography mostly being treated not as a science but merely as “a dictionary mindlessly fusing into one lump anything that comes into the head of its author” (Tsirkulyar..., 1863b: 117). This kind of lack of systematicity in teaching a subject was nothing out of the ordinary for the educational system in the mid-19th-century Russian Empire. Based on an account by A.M. Savelyev, this precisely was the case with language arts instruction in Russian gymnasiums in the 1860s, where the subject was taught not only differently by different instructors but in a completely unsystematic manner too. Things even got as far as one language arts teacher “resolutely refusing to use any kind of system in his teaching” and instead working in class with any text that came to hand – and doing so on the grounds of “the vastness and diversity of the world of language arts” (Tsirkulyar..., 1863a: 66). Thus, in the 1860s, geography instruction was superior in quality in ordinary Russian gymnasiums to language arts instruction, with it simply remaining unclear in the case of the latter what specifically to teach in the gymnasium course. In the case of geography, while things were relatively clear in terms of methodology and objectives, the irrational distribution of course time across grades was still hindering teaching geography using “a descriptive and pictorial element”, a technique aimed at enhancing students’ learning experiences in the subject in helping them develop an idea of what different nations were like.

Before we examine Spassky’s suggestions on how to improve geography instruction, it will be logical to touch upon student performance on exams in different gymnasiums at the time. In the case of the language arts course, due to the absence of a single system for teaching it in Russian gymnasiums in the 1860s, exam outcomes would gauge back then the effectiveness of the pedagogical systems of certain instructors only. For instance, in Novocherkassk Host Gymnasium, junior grade teachers of language arts tried to teach the fundamentals of philology by way of A.Kh. Vostokov (GARO. F. 358. Op. 1. D. 288. L. 21). Understandably, the use of a teaching system of this kind made little sense, inasmuch as there was a mismatch between the learning material and the potential of young gymnasium students, with exam outcomes typically indicating that “even those in third grade exhibit a rather jumbled command of the sentence and its parts, are scarcely familiar with the parts of speech, and tend to be poor at parsing sentences, with many resorting to

guesswork” (Tsirkulyar..., 1863d: 204). On the other hand, much better results were achieved by students taught by senior grade instructor A.M. Savelyev, who prioritized the practical study of works of literature. It was particularly stressed by the inspector that his students had read many top works of Russian and foreign literature “in part, if not in full” (Tsirkulyar..., 1863c: 12). In the case of geography, ‘A Note on Geography Instruction in Gymnasiums’ reveals that some form of common understanding had been reached in the Kharkov Educational District as to how to improve instruction in this course (i.e., improve it by means of a stronger “descriptive and pictorial element”). We can judge the degree to which such a notion of provincial pedagogues about pedagogical ideals was actually the case only from the actual outcomes of their activity reported officially. This begs the question, “Did other teachers (other than Spassky) actually employ supplementary literature in teaching their subject and did it produce positive results?”

Let us take a look at the outcomes of some gymnasium inspections conducted in 1862. Unfortunately, the exam reports for the Kharkov gymnasiums offer no information on specific subjects, and are the least informative in general (probably, because the district’s authorities were aware of the level of teaching there) (Tsirkulyar..., 1862: 168-173). In Kursk Gymnasium, students reportedly demonstrated a satisfactory level of knowledge on their final exam. It was particularly stressed in the report of an inspector from Kharkov University that the teacher had used in class, alongside the textbook, descriptions of famed journeys with the aim of helping “students learn about the way of life, mores, and character of different peoples” (Tsirkulyar..., 1862: 176-177). In addition, the instructor even made time to teach drawing maps, at which he was so successful that right during the exam one of his students asked for permission to draw a map of the United States on the blackboard – and it was done “with remarkable precision” (Tsirkulyar..., 1862: 177). Things were a lot worse in Oryol Gymnasium – out of the 17 examinees, 7 received unsatisfactory grades, with most of the maps composed by these students being “hardly distinguished by accuracy” (Tsirkulyar..., 1862: 179-180). S.V. Pachman was highly critical of the geography exams in Voronezh and Tambov Gymnasiums, noting that the knowledge of most students there was reduced to “condensed” information related to topographic nomenclature, i.e. an ability to name various mountains, seas, rivers, etc. (Tsirkulyar..., 1862: 190). In his view, students new nothing about ethnography or statistics, were unfamiliar with descriptions of famed journeys, and had no idea about “the influence of geographical conditions on the development of society and the inner life of peoples” (Tsirkulyar..., 1862: 190). Lastly, in Novocherkassk Host Gymnasium, students had a “good command” of the material, and the teacher “did not limit himself to just conveying the contents of the textbook but mixed in entertaining stories from first-hand accounts and descriptions of journeys offering insight into the culture of various countries and the distinctive ways of life of their inhabitants” (Tsirkulyar..., 1862: 201).

Thus, out of the five gymnasiums detailed inspection-related information on which was provided in Issue 19 of *Tsirkulyar po Khar'kovskomu uchebnomu okrugu* for 1862, very poor levels of knowledge were exhibited by examinees in two, where instruction was conducted strictly by the textbook, without the use of journey descriptions or ethnographical essays. By contrast, there were two gymnasiums where examinees exhibited clearly satisfactory levels of knowledge – it is in these schools that textbook content was combined with journey descriptions. Finally, the last case was a borderline one – while the overall level of knowledge of examinees was not low, most of them were unable to pass the exam (i.e., the class was divided into two roughly equal camps – those with a good and those with a poor command of the subject). This leads us to conclude that Spassky was right, although he may have overstated things a bit. The thing is that by the 1860s, a new, more effective, system of teaching geography in gymnasiums (at least those within the Kharkov Educational District) had already been developed in broad outline. Under this approach, a good teacher would make active use of supplementary literature, students would study not only topographic nomenclature but statistics and ethnography as well, and inspectors would then check their knowledge in these areas.

Spassky’s claim about the wrong distribution of the course time for geography across grades in early-1860s Russian gymnasiums appears to be well-founded. While the then-latest standards required geography to be taught in an integrated fashion, i.e. by combining textbook content with supplementary literature, there were no changes in the distribution of course time across grades. And, while the obvious solution would have been to increase the number of hours allotted to teaching geography in gymnasiums, doing so would have required reducing the number of hours

allotted to teaching other subjects, which was problematic. So Spassky ingeniously suggested a different solution – keep the total number of hours the same but distribute them evenly across grades and change the order in which the course’s subject matter is taught (Table 2).

Table 2. Distribution of the Geography Subject Matter to Be Taught in Russian Gymnasiums Across Grades – As Proposed by Instructor Spassky

Grade	Number of hours per week	Subject matter
1	2	General survey
2	2	Africa, Asia, Australia, Oceania, America
3	2	Africa, Asia, Australia, Oceania, America
4	2	General survey of national geography
5	2	In-depth instruction in national geography
6	2	Western Europe
7	1	Revision

Note: based on data from *Tsirkulyar po Khar'kovskomu uchebnomu okrugu* (Tsirkulyar po Khar'kovskomu uchebnomu okrugu. 1863. № 13. P. 119).

Spassky explained in detail the logic behind the changes proposed by him. We will examine his speculations without mentioning the specific textbooks he recommended. Most of the time, the pedagogue specified the textbook and supplementary literature to be used in instruction under the proposed distribution of hours. In Grade 1, where general concepts in geography were covered, one hour was lost each week. The solution to this problem proposed by Spassky was to alter the methodology of instruction – shift away from engaging students in mechanical memorization of various facts and terms jumbled together towards having them study the material as part of several units, each of which would describe, in general outline, a specific part of the world (Tsirkulyar..., 1863b: 120-121). The larger part of the world was covered in Grades 2 and 3, which, as can be seen from a comparison of Tables 1 and 2, made an extra hour available for instruction weekly (2 hours per week over the course of 2 years versus 3 hours per week over the course of 1 year). Furthermore, Spassky suggested moving from the simple to the complex – from studying less developed to doing more developed regions, in the following order: Australia, Oceania, and Africa (Grade 2) and Asia and America (Grade 3) (Tsirkulyar..., 1863b: 121). Spassky placed a particular emphasis on the following idea, one crucial to the new distribution of the subject matter across grades: “Learning geography in this way will not be fraught with mental strain – little by little, students will move from the easiest to the hardest, with a focus on learning about the relationship between man and nature. By employing journey descriptions, for which there will be enough time available under our approach, we can have a better focus on ethnography, an area that has barely lent itself to instruction up to now. And, by enabling students to get to know different peoples and learn what life was like at different stages of their history, we can help them develop a good grounding in history” (Tsirkulyar..., 1863b: 121). The idea that geography must be studied by moving from the simple to the complex was actually a central one to Spassky – he founded on it the entire logic behind reform of geography instruction in gymnasiums.

Thus, subsequently, in Grades 4 and 5, there would be instruction in the geography of the Russian Empire, to which an extra hour would be allotted each week (2 hours per week over the course of 2 years against 2 hours per week in the first year and 1 hour per week in the second year). This extra hour was to help expose students more extensively to supplementary literature (e.g., ‘A Study of Trade at Ukrainian Fairs’ by I.S. Aksakov) (Tsirkulyar..., 1863b: 121). On the other hand, instruction in the geography of Western Europe was to serve as a conclusion to the course in Grade 6 – as the world’s most complex and developed part. Spassky commented on this in an emotional and literary manner. He readily acknowledged the superiority of Western Europe over the Russian Empire (“It starts in the lower grades with where use was barely made of the axe, scythe, or sickle, progresses little by little to where the rays of civilization began to dawn, flows through, and concludes in the higher grades with the political geography of Europe – a radiant point on the surface of the globe” (Tsirkulyar..., 1863b: 123). The downside to Spassky’s proposal

was that the coverage of Western Europe would be allocated an hour less (2 hours per week over the course of 1 year versus 3 hours per week over the course of 1 year). While Spassky did not comment on this directly, he may well have believed that this shortcoming was to be strongly offset by the fact (he mentioned this in a note) that, under his system, it would not be the coverage of European geography preceding the coverage of European history, but the other way round, which would reduce significantly the volume of information required to be given to students as part of the program (Tsirkulyar..., 1863b: 122). Lastly, in Grade 7 there remained in place 1 hour for revision. Spassky was convinced that now, with the coverage of geography becoming uninterrupted, it would be a lot more fruitful (Tsirkulyar..., 1863b: 122).

It is also to be noted that Spassky was a staunch advocate of the right of instructors to decide what materials to use in their teaching, regardless of the conventional importance of having continuity in course material. Although he acknowledged that it was cheaper to have a single textbook, he still argued that no expense must be grudged to purchase several suitable books in the absence of a quality textbook (Tsirkulyar..., 1863b: 122). Moreover, he considered the creation of a quality textbook in the 1860s an utter impossibility, citing as a reason precisely the rapid development of geography and methods for teaching it (“There are so few practices that are firmly in place and commonly accepted” (Tsirkulyar..., 1863b: 122)). Nevertheless, Spassky did not see the absence of a good textbook as a serious problem and was convinced of the ability of teachers to achieve good results through a particular combination of relevant books, which did not necessarily have to include geography-specific academic study guides (Tsirkulyar..., 1863b: 122).

In concluding the examination of ‘A Note on Geography Instruction in Gymnasiums’, it is worth observing that its author, Spassky, appears to be a lot bolder than the author of the note ‘On Russian Language Arts Instruction in Gymnasiums’, A.M. Savelyev. The purpose behind the latter’s sharing of his teaching methods was to trigger a discussion in hopes that there would finally be developed, based on best practices from teachers in the Kharkov Educational District, a uniform teaching program and an appropriate textbook (Tsirkulyar..., 1861: 66, 69-70). Thus, A.M. Savelyev made no pretense of designing a new, more effective, methodology for teaching language arts. Spassky took it a step further – he approached the district’s administration with a specific teaching program of his own design. He did not propose implementing this program across the board but just asked for permission to alter the distribution of the course time for geography across grades (Tsirkulyar..., 1863b: 123).

Quite predictably, this proposal for reform was not met without objection, including within the gymnasium itself. Spassky was challenged by Gadzyatsky, another geography teacher, whose background nothing is known of whatsoever. The participation in the pedagogical discussion of this perfectly ordinary teacher, who, unlike A.M. Savelyev and V.L. Spassky, did not do much writing, was a testimony to the ability of the teaching community within the Kharkov Educational District to engage in discussion of topical issues related to education. Not only did Gadzyatsky initiate a debate with his colleague, but he actually produced a note of his own on geography instruction. Yet his note, while even more ambitious than Spassky’s, was founded not on pedagogical but purely ideological considerations – specifically, ideas tracing back to the Official Nationality theory, which by the start of the 1860s had, obviously, become obsolete. Evidently, Gadzyatsky belonged to the older generation of teachers. At any rate, Tsirkulyar po Khar'kovskomu uchebnomu okrugu mentions him as a person “with extensive experience in pedagogy” (Tsirkulyar..., 1863b: 126).

Gadzyatsky proposed a complete overhaul of the gymnasium curriculum. More specifically, he suggested keeping only “those subjects that bring light into a child’s soul and that cultivate a proper attitude toward God and toward themselves, with a focus on nurturing their spiritual growth” (Tsirkulyar..., 1863b: 126). These subjects would be taught in three stages. These stages would correspond to the junior, secondary, and higher grades. In the junior grades (Grades 1 through 3), only “descriptive” disciplines would be taught; no textbook would be used, with reliance being on a reader and on teacher questions – this was to help cultivate in students the “ability to reason independently” (Tsirkulyar..., 1863b: 126). In the secondary grades (Grades 4 and 5), there would be instruction in disciplines related to “the laws of inner life” and a textbook would be used (Tsirkulyar..., 1863b: 126). What many find the hardest to understand is what exactly Gadzyatsky wished to be in the curriculum for the higher grades (Grades 6 through 7). Since his note is only available to us in retold form, it is hard to tell if it is his failure to formulate it clearly or, rather, others’ failure to understand what he wanted to get across. Evidently, he wished that

higher-grade students be taught an integrated course, one combining several sciences. For instance, in the case of science class, after receiving in Grades 4 and 5 instruction in the sciences concerned with “the laws of the inner life of nature (chemistry, physics, anatomy, physiology)”, students would explore “the gradual engagement of those laws in practice (the history of creation)” in Grades 6 and 7 (Tsirkulyar..., 1863b: 126-127). Textbooks were to be replaced in these grades by lecture notes (Tsirkulyar..., 1863b: 126). Arguably, Gadzyatsky, above all, was desirous that study at a gymnasium should be used to help children form a religious picture of the world, and this would be done in a gradual manner, starting with exposing them to simple descriptions of carefully selected facts, then instructing them in certain immutable laws in both the exact sciences and the humanities, and concluding with synthesizing all this knowledge into a single religious-mystical system.

Gadzyatsky proposed an overhaul of geography instruction via a similar scheme. The changes proposed by him, clearly, surpassed in scale those proposed by Spassky. The only grade where the subject matter would not change would be Grade 1. However, Gadzyatsky approached the general survey part in a lot more speculative manner. For instance, he suggested that junior-grade students should explore the relationship between the mathematical climate and the real one (Tsirkulyar..., 1863b: 126). Second-grade students would receive general instruction in nature, and third-graders – in peoples, with special focus on the ethnographical component (Tsirkulyar..., 1863b: 126-127). For fourth- and fifth-graders, Gadzyatsky designed some new courses, which had little to do with traditional geography and were more related to modern psychology and sociology. For instance, he suggested providing students with general instruction in “the laws that govern a person’s thoughts, feelings, and desires” or having them explore “where industry, science, and art come from” (Tsirkulyar..., 1863b: 127). In Grades 6 and 7, the course would be concluded with history (Tsirkulyar..., 1863b: 127). However strange most of his ideas may seem, arguably, Gadzyatsky simply wished to bring together in a single discipline several subjects concerned with the study of society and the place of man in it. On the lowest level in this discipline in his pedagogical system – the descriptive one – was geography, as a science that describes different peoples and their conditions of life. On the middle level – the one concerned with “the laws of inner life” of people and society – were descriptive psychology and sociology. Lastly, on the higher level – the one concerned with “the gradual engagement of those laws in practice” – was history, concerned with showing one how the various theoretical psychological and sociological constructions are applied in practice. While this system was not devoid of ingenuity, it could hardly have been implemented in practice. In essence, decreeing that geography be taught exclusively in the junior grades would have meant admitting that most examinees would not know any geography at the end of their school program, given the limited cognitive abilities of most junior-graders and the absence of opportunity to revise the subject in the secondary and higher grades.

The discussion between the two geographers was continued in person at meetings of the Academic Board of First Kharkov Gymnasium. Unfortunately, we do not have all of the details of those meetings. Evidently, Gadzyatsky confronted Spassky with specific criticisms of his proposals, most of which the latter, however, parried with brilliance. For instance, Gadzyatsky took issue with the complexity of certain geographical concepts – probably, in the context that reducing the time allotted to teaching geography in Grade 1 (an idea proposed by Spassky) would make it harder for children to master the course’s conceptual content (e.g., some students having difficulty with the term ‘ecliptic’) (Tsirkulyar..., 1863b: 126). Spassky did not contest this – he actually fully agreed with his opponent and even gave an example from his own personal experience. He revealed how he once managed to explain the concept of the ecliptic to only some of his first-grade students at an uyezd school (Tsirkulyar..., 1863b: 126). However, unlike his opponent, Spassky attributed this not to the complexity of the actual concept but to the fact that it was still too early for a child in first grade to grasp it. Indeed, he did not have to make as great an effort when explaining it to his third-grade students (Tsirkulyar..., 1863b: 126).

The Academic Board of First Kharkov Gymnasium sided with Spassky in the discussion. Both teachers had had their notes submitted to the Kharkov Educational District. Yet “the Board of First Gymnasium expressed the wish that all educational institutions, while being expected to keep to the official program, should only be allowed to move lectures in a particular discipline between grades – this could involve adding or removing hours between courses, all to help ensure high quality learning throughout the curriculum” (Tsirkulyar..., 1863b: 124). In other words, the

Academic Board seemed to be supportive of Spassky's proposal in any event, regardless of the course of the discussion on changing the system of teaching geography in the Kharkov Educational District, and willing to permit him to implement his innovative pedagogical ideas in practice. Furthermore, the Board raised the issue of empowering educational institutions to choose for themselves how to distribute the course time for different subjects across grades, which suggests that the two disputants were not the only instructors keenly interested in the issue.

Since geography, unfortunately, was not taught as a standalone discipline in 1860s Russian universities, there were neither faculties nor professors of geography at the time. Therefore, the notes of both geographers were forwarded to a Russian history professor named A.P. Zernin to review. A.P. Zernin was a fairly serious scholar with a number of works on the history of Byzantium and the 17th-century Russian state to his name. Perhaps, he would have become more famous, had he been able to conduct his scholarly activity longer (incidentally, he went insane in late 1863, at the age of just 42) (*Russkii biograficheski slovar'*, 1916: 359-363). The fact that he, just like S.V. Pachman, approached in a determined manner working with school teachers specializing in what was not his specialist subject is yet another testimony to the creative atmosphere of partnership that existed in the 1860s Kharkov Educational District among all parties involved – the gymnasiums, the university, and the district's administration.

Upon comparison of the two notes, A.P. Zernin gave preference to Spassky's proposal. He rejected Gadzyatsky's proposed plan for reform of geography instruction in gymnasiums without even offering a detailed critique thereof – he just called it “fantastical and impracticable” (*Tsirkulyar...*, 1863b: 127). He found that the plan lacked “clarity in certain areas”, which would complicate the practical implementation thereof (*Tsirkulyar...*, 1863b: 127). This criticism is important in that it reveals that in the early 1860s the administration of the Kharkov Educational District was capable of critical evaluation of proposals put forward by teachers. Its approbation of the proposals put forward by A.M. Savelyev and Spassky was hardly formal by nature. A.P. Zernin spared no compliments in his admiration of Spassky's note. He found Spassky's criticism of the then-existing system of instruction “highly worthwhile” (*Tsirkulyar...*, 1863b: 124). The historian also praised Spassky's choice of supplementary content, noting that “Mr Spassky deserves every acknowledgement at least for the reason that he tries to draw attention to the importance of teaching geography in gymnasiums using good pieces of writing, such as the one on Ukrainian fairs by Aksakov” (*Tsirkulyar...*, 1863b: 124). In terms of Spassky's proposals for changes to the distribution of course time and subject matter across grades, A.P. Zernin took a particular liking to the idea of progressing from simple to complex topics (*Tsirkulyar...*, 1863b: 125).

Finally, A.P. Zernin concluded that, since Spassky's ideas were well-founded and logical, he should be given permission to implement the proposed changes to geography instruction in the grades he taught (*Tsirkulyar...*, 1863b: 126). However, at the same time A.P. Zernin observed that “in terms of convenience, it must be confessed that Spassky's scheme presents a few inconveniences” (*Tsirkulyar...*, 1863b: 126). His biggest concern was that the new system could be too demanding of teachers (*Tsirkulyar...*, 1863b: 126). Although A.P. Zernin did not explain what he meant, one may venture to guess that he was apprehensive that not every teacher would be able to pick the right supplementary literature for their classes. In conjunction with this, he brought up a major issue related to geography instruction, something that Spassky had not mentioned – that geography was not taught in Russian universities and, because of that, gymnasiums lacked instructors with a specialist qualification in the subject (“With universities offering no geography, we now have so many cases where the post of geography teacher is given to someone freshly out of school whose knowledge and skills have not been verified”) (*Tsirkulyar...*, 1863b: 126).

Thus, on one hand, A.P. Zernin backed a teacher with a sensible proposal for reforming geography instruction, and, on the other, curbed the enthusiasms of that teacher and his colleagues a little – by reminding them that, in working out reforms in education, one should not overlook pedagogues' level of training and competence too. Where this level was low, excessive freedom to choose teaching methods and objectives would normally lead to negative consequences, a case in point being the unmethodical teaching of language arts in gymnasiums within the Kharkov Educational District in the early 1860s (e.g., the case of a teacher working in class with any text that came to hand). Thus, the discussion around geography instruction conducted in the Kharkov Educational District resulted not in the introduction of a new system of teaching geography, per se, but in the district's administration, essentially, giving pedagogues the green light to develop a

teaching program of their own, with the authors of programs deemed potentially effective receiving permission to teach using the system of their own, even if it would require making changes to the distribution of course time across grades.

4. Conclusion

Our analysis of the materials published in *Tsirkulyar po Khar'kovskomu uchebnomu okrugu* in 1863 in relation to the geography instruction discussion examined in this paper helped gain an insight both into geography instruction in provincial gymnasiums in the Russian Empire and into ordinary instructors' pedagogical views of teaching the subject there. The study yielded the following conclusions:

1) During that period, geography was turning from “a dictionary mindlessly fusing into one lump anything that comes into the head of its author” into a school subject that met the requisites of pedagogy. A shift was taking place away from rote learning with a predominant focus on topographic nomenclature towards meaningful learning based on balancing the core learning material with supplementary literature, like journey descriptions and popular essays, the idea being to enable students to get to know other countries and cultures. Of particular importance in this respect was the release in the 1850s of books on various regions across the Russian Empire.

2) At the same time, the process did not unfold without resistance from conservative pedagogues. In the course of the discussion, it was suggested to augment the religious element in education by removing from the gymnasium curriculum the courses not related to God and reducing geography to a sort of introduction to history rendered through the lens of religious-mystical traditions.

3) Another major issue was the irrational distribution of the course time for geography across grades, which was out of line with the latest pedagogical trends at the time. Most of this time was accounted for by junior school, i.e. a time of limited cognitive abilities for most children, when they had yet to be exposed to the study of adjacent subjects, such, above all, as history. There simply was not enough time physically for supplementary literature, like journey descriptions and popular essays.

4) Finally, there was the issue of incompetent teachers. Since geography was not offered as a standalone subject at universities in the Russian Empire, instruction in geography was often provided in gymnasiums by total strangers.

However, despite all these challenges, geography was not the most problematic subject in the gymnasium curriculum. While the administration of the Kharkov Educational District and most teaching staff there had a more or less clear idea of how to conduct instruction in geography in a new way, by reference to changes in one's notions of the subject, things were not as good for some other subjects. For instance, things were rather chaotic in Russian gymnasiums with instruction in language arts, with there totally lacking a common understanding of how to teach the subject.

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