The Old Campus
The Beauty of the Old Campus is never more apparent than on an early morning in May. The Old Library building is shown in the distance; next is Sherwin Hall, the Women's building; the Law building is nearest us.

The Difference Between Russian and American Universities — Bought Your June 15 Reunion Ticket? — Last Year a Big One for Minnesota — Board of Regents Promote Six to Professorships — The South as an Alumnus of '18 Sees It — Education Banquet to be Held Wednesday: Alumni Invited — Five Pages of Personalia — News
Russian and U. S. Universities, Compared

An Analysis of the University of Petrograd as It Was Before the Revolution and the University of Minnesota Today by a Former Russian Professor

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There are many differences between the American and the Russian universities as they existed before the Revolution. In their organization and functions, Russian universities were more similar to European than to the American type of university. The principal differences apparent to me are described in the following paragraphs.

Russian universities represented something midway between American colleges and graduate schools. If we exclude from American colleges the freshmen and sophomores and add to them one or two years of postgraduate work, we will have something similar to the Russian type of university. This is due to the fact that the students’ average age on entering a university in Russia was about 19 to 22 years, while an average age of graduation was about 23 to 26 years. The conditions of students and the methods of teaching correspond to this type. Attendance at classes by the students was absolutely voluntary. There were no quizzes, except a definite number of examinations once a year, or sometimes, if a student wanted to postpone his examinations, once in two years. Students who failed to pass the necessary minimum of examinations in two years were expelled. Everyone who passed the so-called “examination of maturity” could enter the university.

Except for seminars and laboratories, the method of teaching was almost exclusively that of lecturing. We had no instructors except the assistants in laboratories.

The lectures were given by full professors and by privat-docents. Privat-docents were the fully qualified scholars who, after getting their degrees, had the right to attach themselves to any university and give any course in their specialty, even the course identical with the course of a full professor. This led to the competition of the professors, and enabled talented privat-docents to compete successfully with the full professors and in this way to make their academic careers. Students were permitted to choose the course which they wanted to take. As a result, the classes of a talented privat-docent or professor were attended very well and had sometimes about a thousand regular students, while the audience of an unpopular or poor professor was “empty.”

As to the talented students, they attended only such courses where the professor gave something new not to be found in books. Attendance at lectures which only repeated what was said in the books was regarded by them as a “wasting of time.” Correspondingly, they attended very few courses and concentrated their activity in the seminars and laboratories.

So much for this side of difference. Comparing this system with the American one, I find that it gave more opportunities for the talented students and at the same time was less efficient than the American system in educating and in raising the intellectual standard of an average student. The American system of compulsory attendance of classes mingled with the privilege of non-attendance for the talented students is, it seems to me, the best. The system of privat-docent is also a good institution in my opinion. It stimulates the young as well as the old scholars to be efficient in their works and researches. The method of selection and giving mental tests to students entering the American university used now in this country is a great preference in comparison with the Russian and European universities.

Another marked difference between Russian and American universities we find in their administration, or constitution. From 1905 to 1918 almost all Russian universities were State universities. Their administrative officers beginning with the Rector or the president of the university and ending with the deans and professors were elected; the Rector was elected for three or two years by the professors of a university, the deans for one or two years by the professors and students’ representatives of a corresponding “faculty” or department. They usually were elected from the most prominent professors of the university. Their election had to be sanctioned by the Russian government. If a nominated candidate was not approved by the government, it was necessary to nominate a new candidate. Usually after the second nomination the candidate was approved by the authorities.

University professors were elected in the following way: As soon as a chair was vacant, the university declared a “concourse” or competition for that position. All who had the necessary degrees and wanted to participate in the concourse were obliged to submit their curricula and scientific
works. All specialists in this subject in all universities of Russia were asked to offer the candidates who, according to their opinion, were the most deserving of the position. After that the curricula and works of the candidates and the references of all specialists were carefully studied by all corresponding specialists of the university and the corresponding faculty or department. When the department had made its choice, the nominated candidate was finally elected by the members of the university.

The above shows that the highest scientific as well as administrative authority of a Russian university was the “All-University Council” composed out of all professors of the university and—at one time—out of the students’ representatives. The same has to be said about the council or faculty of a department. All important matters had to be decided by these councils—correspondingly. The Rector and the deans were only the executives of the decisions of the councils of the university or those of a department. Only in a narrow sphere of insignificant affairs had they authority to act without the opinion of the council.

It is clear that this system is different from that of the American universities. Surely it had its own disadvantages, but in Russia its results were not so bad as often was the best of the possible systems and in general worked pretty well. The system of government appointment of the rectors, professors and deans which we had before 1905 and which is in effect now under the Soviet government happened to be in the Russian conditions incomparably worse than this system of “University autonomy” of 1905 to 1918. The principal defect of this system was that it checked the initiative and energy of the university administration. It did not give them the opportunity to carry out a definite and steady policy in the university activity, and made it dependent to a great extent on the “professor’s faction.” But under the Russian conditions, these defects were less than those which resulted and result from the autocracy of the government and its purely political aspirations.

In the system of granting academic degrees there is also a great difference between Russian and American universities. In general, it was more similar to that of the University of Oxford or Cambridge in England. The principal difference was that the conditions which a candidate had to fulfill to get the master or doctor degrees were considerably more difficult than those of this country. From this point of view, it seems to me that to get a master degree in Russia was more difficult than to get a doctor’s degree in American universities. This explains why in Russian universities only a part of the professors had the doctor’s degree and why they got it only at the age of forty or fifty.

A conspicuous difference existed also in regard to athletics and sports. The Russian universities had scarcely any athletic and sports. Of course, a part of the students participated in this or that kind of sport, but as a private person only. Our universities did not have either gymnasia or any university teams. In brief, sport did not play any role in the university life. This was a great defect. If the role of sport in American universities is, perhaps, too great—from a foreign point of view—is this kind of physical education in the Russian and even in Continental European universities has been completely neglected.

There is no need to say that the American universities as far as their buildings and their comforts are concerned are in far better condition than the Russian universities. The American university budget and its financial possibilities are far greater. While the University of Minnesota has about four million dollars a year, the University of Petrograd—the best and biggest university in Russia—did not have even one million a year. However, our laboratories, library and other purely scientific equipment were organized nearly as well as that of any American university. This probably was possible because the university money was spent almost exclusively for these purely scientific purposes and only a small part of it was spent for “comfort.”

At last, I found out that the students of American universities are very similar to the students in Russia, with this difference: that an average student in this country works more and is more “businesslike” than an average student in Russia. Thanks to the system of complete liberty of attendance at classes and lack of any control during the first year of studentship, a considerable part of the Russian students did not do much in the field of university studies and used to spend their time in enjoying their “freedom.” I found out also that the American students in general are likely to have a greater balance of mind than the Russian students used to have, especially in political matters.

Further, the teaching and education in American universities have a more applied character, are more realistic and better prepare for a successful struggle in life than that of the Russian universities. The American system trains not only the intellect but the character of the students as well, while the Russian universities gave only purely intellectual training to their students.

On the other hand, among the Russian students I used to meet perhaps a greater percentage of those who were working in the field of science with enthusiasm “for the sake of science itself” rather than for any considerations of profit. It may be that this, my impression, is not quite accurate because of the narrow field of my experience in America in this respect.

I should like to say a hundred of things which would indicate many brilliant and positive qualities of the American students and professors, and many preferences of the American universities which I admire and most highly appreciate. But as I am writing in American and for an American university magazine I fear my compliments might be taken for flattery. Therefore I prefer not to say them. I hope in the future to write about the American universities in foreign publications. Such a work will be more proper there. In conclusion I only will say that I am quite optimistic concerning the American universities, professors and students. Their shortcomings which are indicated by some American writers appear to me as very relative, not always really existing, and quite temporary. In the present American universities there is now being educated a generation which it seems to me will be quite worthy of its great forefathers. If all countries could have a young generation like the present American students, three-quarters of the world’s problems and difficulties would have been settled.

BOUGHT YOUR TICKET FOR REUNION?

HAVE you bought your ticket? If you haven’t our advice is to plan your trip now, so that you will reach the University of Minnesota before noon of Monday, June 15. Your classmates are coming by auto, train, and street car to take part in the gigantic reunion which is to take place on the campus that day. At four o’clock you will form in line with your classmates, carrying the numbers of your class, and march in procession to the Memorial Stadium at the head of the long line of graduating seniors. You will listen to Governor Theodore Christianson (’06, ’10 L) deliver the commencement address and see the seniors receive their diplomas from Presby Coffman. Time of Commencement exercises was changed at deans’ meeting Wednesday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. so that the alumni may take part.

Every one will be there—people you haven’t seen for years and whom you thought you had forgotten. But once you see their faces it all comes back to you. In all too short a time the throng begins to gather at the Minnesota Union for the banquet.

Here are more friends, more familiar faces, an excellent dinner, a lively program with the Class of ’15 in charge. Your old teammates, now successful important businessmen, wax sentimental over the “days when," and you find that “you wouldn’t have missed it for anything.”