Trude Maurer (Hg.)

Kollegen – Kommilitonen – Kämpfer

Europäische Universitäten im Ersten Weltkrieg
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The Capital University in a Time of War: Saint-Petersburg/Petrograd 1914–1917

Evgenij A. Rostovcev

To study the words and actions of intellectual elites in times of crisis can illuminate with particular clarity not just the cultural, political, and social values of these elites but also their interaction with society as a whole. The responses of intellectuals to World War I – an era of crisis and transition in European historical consciousness – has proven an especially fruitful area of research, one that is being increasingly extended to Russia, where the revolutions of 1917 long dominated historical scholarship. To be sure, an analysis of the universities’ responses to the War contributes to our understanding of the revolutionary transformation of higher education after October 1917. But other questions must also be posed: How did Russia’s academic corporation conceive its intellectual, social, and patriotic role during this time of national emergency? How did the War affect the universities? Did they mobilize their resources – intellectual, human, material – for the war effort?

To address these questions, this paper will examine the interaction between Petrograd university – the most privileged institution of higher education in the Russian empire, the central government, and the municipal authorities during World War I. Crucial to understanding this interaction is the concept of ‘university autonomy’, which underpinned the attitudes and aspirations of university professors and, therefore, shaped their responses to the new demands placed upon them and the university as a whole.

University Autonomy as a Tool of Political Struggle

The significance of the issue of university autonomy in Russian society went far beyond the universities themselves. The very term was inextricably connected with the Russian liberation movement. It is important, therefore, to understand the extent of the formal and actual autonomy that Saint Petersburg’s university enjoyed on the eve of the Great War.

From a legal point of view, the autonomy of the capital’s university, just like that of the Empire’s other universities, was highly limited by the University Statute

of 1884\(^2\), Temporary Regulations of 1905\(^3\) and the Senate Decree to the Minister of Education of November 28, 1908.\(^4\) The university enjoyed the right to elect its teaching staff freely – the rector, the pro-rector, the dean, professors and lecturers (privat-docenty) – but the Ministry of Education had the right not to approve of the university’s decision and to appoint a person of its own choice to any university position. Any change in the composition of university departments was likewise subject to approval by the Ministry, which also appointed the members of state examination commissions, stipulated rules of behaviour for students and auditors, sanctioned curricula and examination schedules, determined the level of tuition fees, set university budgets and stipulated how they were to be spent, etc.

However, this situation ran counter to the attitudes and aspirations of the university elites, an overwhelming majority of whom saw the universities as public rather than state organizations whose main task was not so much to cater for the state’s utilitarian needs as to „enlighten“ the citizens. A specific trait of Saint Petersburg university, singular among Russian university communities, was the ideal of the teaching staff as a united corporation including both the professors and the lecturers, which gave it a particularly high level of cohesion.\(^5\)

In considering the history of the universities’ struggle for „autonomy“, we must also take into account that the confrontation between the authorities and the universities at the beginning of the 20th century had its roots in a long liberal tradition of Russian university education; the teaching staff of the institutions of higher education was one of the main resources of the Constitutional Democratic Party, which was opposed to autocratic rule. To grant the universities the legal autonomy they demanded would consequently have meant placing the system of higher education under the control of the opposition.

At the same time the decisions of the Professors’ Councils had a decisive impact on the entire course of the university’s internal life. In other words, the university’s actual autonomy was incomparably greater than its formal autonomy. Any ministerial interference, though formally legitimate, met with extremely stiff resistance from the university body.

The contradiction between the autonomy demanded and that granted, between actual and formal autonomy, turned the universities into dangerous enemies of the political regime. In many respects, this basic situation shaped the character of „university patriotism“ and determined the strategy that the universities chose during the war.

\(^2\) The statute of Russian universities of 1884 can be found in: Sbornik postanovlenij ministerstva narodnogo prosve\v{c}enija [Collection of the Decisions of the Ministry of Enlightenment (Ministry of Education)]. Vol. IX, SPb. 1893, cols. 980–1048.
\(^4\) The decree can be found in: Pravo, 7 December 1908, 2738–2739.
Mobilizing the Intellect: Defence of the Country or Corporative Offensive?

During the Great War, Petrograd University found itself in the unfamiliar role of the centre of ,,university opposition“ (universitetskaja fronda), a part that had been played by Moscow University until the government clampdown of 1911. Indeed, most members of the university’s Council supported left-wing (Cadet) or moderate (Octobrist) liberalism.

During the first year of the war, at least until the summer of 1915, the Russian liberals’ patriotic programme (which was most consistently formulated by the Constitutional Democrats) included the idea of a so-called ,internal peace‘ (vnutrennij mir). This entailed, on the one hand, a reconciliation with the government for the sake of victory, joint resistance against revolution, and a justification of Russian imperialism as a ,,liberation“ of the Slavic peoples and Europe, but also, on the other hand, the idea that the war should advance internal reforms, something that was thought to be guaranteed by an alliance with the democratic nations. The notion of ,,internal peace“ was expressed by rector Ervin Grimm at an emergency session of the University Council held on 29 July 1914 and in an address to the Emperor ,,unanimously“ adopted at that session.6

The destruction of Louvain University with its unique library in August 1914 was called the ,,Sarajevo of Europe’s intelligentsia“.7 This act of destruction triggered numerous philippics against the ,,German barbarians“ by the intellectual elites of countries opposed to Germany. Probably the first scholarly community in Russia to react to the events of Louvain was Petrograd University. At its session of 1 (14) September 1914, the Council approved a sympathetic telegram to Louvain University and decided to contribute to resurrecting its library by sending duplicate books from Petrograd University’s collection.8 This impassioned reaction to the events of Louvain was fully consistent with the doctrine of ,,liberal patriotism“ and did not mean that the professoriate had slipped into chauvinism, as some scholars have claimed. A single discordant note was struck at the same session by Aleksandr Dogel’ (incidentally, a Russified German by origin), professor at the Faculty of Physics and Mathematics, who suggested that the professors stop publishing their work in German, subscribing to German journals, and buying instruments and chemicals for the university’s laboratories in Germany and Austro-Hungary. Significantly, the University Council declined even to discuss Dogel’s suggestions.9

Much has already been said about the ,,war of professors‘ manifests“. On the German side, there was the Appeal to the Civilized World (or ,,Manifesto of the 93“)

6 Protokoly zasedanij Soveta Imperatorskogo Petrogradskogo universiteta za 1914 god [The Minutes of the Sessions of the Council of the Imperial University of Petrograd in 1914], Petrograd [Pg.] 1916, 72–73.
8 Protokoly zasedanij za 1914 god, 76–77.
9 Protokoly zasedanij za 1914 god, 78.
and the *Declaration of Professors of the German Reich*, both published in October 1914. "Replies" to the *Appeal to the Civilized World* were particularly numerous in Russia—probably because the country was not included among the Appeal’s addressees. In particular, the "Manifesto of the 93" included a passage that was offensive to the Russian scholars, since it excluded Russia from the category of civilized nations. 10

The elaboration of Petrograd University’s manifesto is of special interest to the present topic, particularly because some authors have falsely claimed that the University Council adopted a ‘Reply’ to the *Appeal to the Civilized World* and sent it to other institutions of higher education in Petrograd and Moscow to collect signatures, supposedly triggering the expulsion of Austro-Hungarian and German subjects from the universities. It is important to stress, however, that the very idea of writing a manifesto in reply to the Germans’ only emerged when Petrograd University’s governing body learned that other institutions of higher education were preparing such documents. Under these circumstances, it would have been seen as an affront for the capital’s university not to issue such a statement as well. At the same time, the rector did not even attempt to put this issue on the University Council’s agenda, since it was clear that the Council would not be able to formulate a unanimous "reply" (such as had been issued by some other institutions of higher education). The university administration mastered this delicate situation by drafting an all-Russian professors’ and academicians’ manifesto in the name of ‘a group of professors’ of the capital’s university. This reply mainly comprised a ‘refutation’ of the main points of the *Appeal to the Civilized World* and essentially corresponded to Cadet leader Pavel Miljukov’s assessment of the *Appeal*, which is why the document was signed by a number of Constitutional Democrats. But even this rather moderate text was not signed by many of the University Council’s members, including such well-known scholars as Aleksandr Voejkov, Ivan Grevs, Ivan Lapšin, Vladimir Steklov, Aleksej Šachmatov and Vladimir Šimkevič. 11

The university’s cautious national-liberal position found another expression in the way it expelled nationals of the enemy countries from among the university’s honorary members. It would be wrong to assume that the University Council expelled German honorary members in an outburst of ‘chauvinistic passion’. The issue was first raised at the Council by professor Aleksandr Dogel in his above-mentioned speech on 1 September 1914. The response of the Council members was even harsher

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10 See e.g.: „Protest predstavitelej russkoj nauki protiv nepravomernogo vedenija vojny Germaniej i Avstro-Vengriey“ [Protest of the Representatives of Russian Science against the illegal warfare of Germany and Austro-Hungary], in: Novoe Vremja, 24 November 1914; „Otvet na vovzvanie k kul’turnomu miru predstavitelej Germanoj nauki i iskusstva (ot konferenci Imperatorskoye Vienno-Meditsinskoj Akademii)“ [Reply to the Appeal to the Civilized World by Representatives of German Scholarship and Art (by the Conference of the Imperial Academy of War Medicine)], in: Rec‘, 29 January (11 February) 1915; S; Otvet professorov i prepodavatelej imperatorskogo universiteta Sv. Vladimira na „Obraščenie k civilizovannym nacijam“ (...) [Reply of the Professors and Teachers of the Imperial University of St. Vladimir to the „Appeal to the Civilized World“] (...) Kiew 1915; „Otvet germanskim učenym“ [Reply to the German Scholars], in: Učennie zapiski imperatorskogo kazanskogo universiteta 1915, no. 9, 1–2.
11 „Otvet germanskim učenym“ [Reply to the German Scholars], in: Den‘, 21 December 1914, 3.
than their reaction to Dogel’s projects for „emancipating Russian scholars from German science“, and the issue was not even debated any further.\textsuperscript{12}

The subsequent expulsion of „enemy“ professors from among the honorary members of the University Council then evolved as a peculiar bureaucratic game between the Council and the government, which demanded an expulsion. The Council eventually succeeded in limiting itself to expelling only professor von Liszt, who had signed the hapless \textit{Appeal to the Civilized World}.

Just like the majority of Russia’s intellectual elite, Petrograd professors perceived the „patriotic war“ as a „war of hope for Russia“\textsuperscript{13} — a war that would unite the nation and its government and push the latter towards reforms. It is important to note that most Petrograd professors supported the demands of the Progressive bloc in the State Duma, created in 1915, which called for the creation of a so-called „Ministry of popular trust“, i. e. a government formed by the Duma, since they believed the authorities to be unable to wage war or to govern the country effectively. In this respect the Petrograd professors formed an integral part of the oppositional public.

Yet, while bearing in mind the university’s participation in the opposition movement developing from the summer of 1915, we should also note that the same year saw an improvement of relations between the Ministry of Education and the Russian professorial community: Count Pavel Ignat’ev, who positioned himself as an advocate of university autonomy, was appointed to succeed the deceased minister Lev Kasso. The professors of the capital’s university, led by rector Ervin Grimm, took an active part in drafting a new statute.\textsuperscript{14} This active co-operation with the ministry apparently toned down the university’s oppositional spirit during this period. It would not be wrong to see this as a secret ‘deal’ between the Council and the Ministry.

Indeed, throughout the entire war-time period, the University demonstrated the patriotism which was officially required. It thus elected Albert I, king of Belgium,\textsuperscript{15} the Supreme Chief of the Russian Army grand prince Nikolaj Nikolaevič and the chairman of State Duma Michail Rodzjanko\textsuperscript{16} honorary members of the university. It even sent congratulations to Nikolaj Nikolaevič.\textsuperscript{17} The university even participated

\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Protokoly zasedanij za 1914 god, 80.}
\textsuperscript{14} E. D. Grimm, „Organizacija universitetskogo prepodavanija po proektu novogo ustava“ [The Organization of University Teaching according to the Draft of a New Statute], in: \textit{Russkaja Mysl’} 1916, no. 4, 109–122; no. 5, 52–57.
\textsuperscript{15} Central’nyj Gosudarstvennyj Istoricheskij Archiv Sankt-Peterburga [CGIA SPb., Central State Historical Archive of Saint-Petersburg] 14/1/11028, fol. 1–4.
\textsuperscript{16} As the State Duma vigorously opposed the government, the unanimous election of the Chairman of the Duma was an outright demonstration of the political sympathies of the university council’s majority. See the minutes of the session of the university council on December 5, 1916 in: CGIA SPb. 14/1/11367, fol. 82v.
\textsuperscript{17} CGIA SPb. 14/1/11029, fol. 1–4. It is worth noting, that the university continued to send such telegrams even during the time he was „exiled“ to command the Caucasian Front and became one of the leaders of Palace opposition. See CGIA SPb. 14/1/11029, fol. 70, 71.
in organizing historical congresses named in honor of Emperor Nicholas II. But in the last analysis, these acts remained wholly within the framework of the liberal-patriotic discourse.

During the war, the written word was an important form of public activity and patriotic demonstration by the professors. The collection of essays entitled *Problems of the World War* is an outstanding example. It contained articles, among others, by professors and lecturers of Petrograd University, including Ervin Grimm, Nikolaj Kareev, Vadim Butenko, Evgenij Tarle, Tadeusz Zieliński (Faddej Zelinskij) and Nikolaj Jastrebov. Several basic assumptions ran through the different articles: that the war had been inevitable; that German militarism grew out of the essence of German national life; that the collision between Germanism and Slavdom was predetermined; that war was being waged not only against Germany, but also against the ruthless ideas of Marxism and nationalism which had impregnated German culture and were now threatening Europe; and that the continent’s liberty and cultural diversity were at stake in victory.

In 1915–1916, the professors of Petrograd University contributed to another project—a collection of articles entitled *Russia and her allies*. According to its editor, Professor Maksim Kovalevskij, the main aim of this volume was not so much to show that Germany was responsible for the war (that went without saying) as „to enable the reader to understand the national psychology of our allies.“ In general, the Petrograd professors were active supporters of a policy that was aimed at overcoming the Anglophobe campaign in the press and criticism of England by the right wing of the State Duma. Petrograd University was an important participant in the cultural contacts with the countries that formed the Entente. This was especially conspicuous in 1916, when the Council elaborated a programme of co-operation between Russian scholars and the intellectual elites of England and France. The British ambassador to Russia, Sir George Buchanan, was elected honorary member of the University in December 1916. The professors also took part in the activities of numerous institutions created with the aim of strengthening ties between the allies—the Society for Rapprochement with England, the Russian-English Society, the French Institute, etc.

18 CGIA Spb. 14/1/11020, fol. 1–10.
21 See the special file on the establishment of closer contacts between English and Russian scholars in: CGIA Spb. 14/1/11199; the minutes of the session of the university council of May 23, 1916 in: 14/1/11367, fol. 32v–33v; the minutes of the session of the university council of December 5, 1916 in: CGIA Spb. 14/1/11367, fol. 92v–93.
22 CGIA Spb. 14/1/11367, fol. 82v.
23 See: E. A. Rostovcev, A. S. Lappo-Danilevskij i peterburgskaja istoričeskaja škola [A. S. Lappo-Danilevskij and St. Petersburg Historical School], Rjazan' 2004, 204–205; F. G. Taratorkin, „A. S. Lappo-Danilevskij i proekt sozdaniia ‚Istorii Rossii‘ na anglijskom jazyke (1915–1918)“ [A. S. Lappo-Danilevskij and the project of writing a „History of Russia“ in English], in:
Assessing the extent of the University’s support for the front, or indeed passing judgment on it, is not an easy task, if only because in all respects it is difficult to distinguish actions which the University declared to have a ‘patriotic’ or military meaning from ‘real’ work for the sake of victory. The university’s reports stressed that its buildings housed several hospitals as well as a reserve regiment, and that many students of the university had volunteered as soldiers or orderlies from the first days of the war. Professors’ and lecturers’ wives took part in the management of field hospitals. The teaching staff resolved to assign 3% of salaries to support the higher education institutions’ field hospital.

In August 1914, the Ministry appealed to all universities to help produce medicine for field ambulances. The problem was that Petrograd University did not have a Medical Faculty. The department of physics and mathematics, which had a chemical laboratory, was therefore entrusted with the task. However, as the rector immediately conceded, the laboratory’s resources were too limited. In the end, however, the Faculty of Physics and Mathematics did turn out to be most suited for the practical tasks of wartime, more so than the other Faculties: History and Philology, Law, or Eastern Languages.

At the very outset of the war, Petrograd’s professors issued an appeal to overcome dependence on Germany in a number of scientific and technological fields, but no concrete steps in this direction were taken. (Russia was especially dependent on Germany in the natural sciences, particularly chemistry, and medicine.) Several lecturers took an active part in the Special Defence Conference and central apparatus of the Military-Industrial Committee (though once more their support was of a moral and organizational rather than technological kind). A number of professors participated in the activities of the Commission for the Study of Russia’s Natural and Productive Forces (KEPS), but this was a project of the Academy of Sciences rather than the University.

On the whole, as university reports and faculty teaching surveys’ show, the war had no serious impact on the practice of teaching and research of most of the university’s departments. An analysis of the teaching staff’s approach towards wartime events thus shows that, for all the professors’ ‘patriotism’, they perceived the war above all as an instrument for the realization of certain political and corporative values that were dear to them.


„Otnošenie k nastrojajčezj vojnej“ [The Position towards the Present War], in: Otčet o sostojanii i dejatel’nosti Petrogradskogo universiteta za 1914 god, Pg. 1915, 91–93.

Novoe Vremja, 6 (19) August 1914, 5.

Protokol zasedania Soveta Imperatorskogo Petrogradskogo universiteta. 1 sendjabra 1914 goda, 82.

After the February Revolution, the liberal professors thought their aims, both political and corporative, had been achieved. The Ministry of Education was in the hands of the Constitutional Democratic Party. Although a new general statute for the universities was not adopted, individual decrees enacted by the Provisional Government established the system of near-total university autonomy so long coveted by more than one generation of professors.28

The Municipal Authorities, City Autonomy and the Capital’s University

Let us now turn to the relationship between the city government and the University. Until 1917, the system of municipal self-government in Russia was based on the Town Statute of 1892. True, there had been a reform of Saint-Petersburg’s system of municipal self-government in 1903, which secured a special privileged status for Saint-Petersburg’s City Duma compared with the Empire’s other local self-government bodies. Tenants who paid more than a certain amount of taxes were included among the city’s voters; the range of Duma decisions that were subject to ministerial approval was narrowed; control over the municipal executive was perfected; and the mayor was now elected by the Duma, although its choice had to be approved by the authorities. However, the activities of the capital’s public administration remained stringently controlled and strictly regulated by the Ministry of the Interior.29

The political composition of the City Duma was somewhat at variance with the University Council’s pro-Cadet stance. The voting qualifications (only 1% of the population was entitled to vote) meant that conservative forces wielded a significant influence in Petrograd’s Duma. The central struggle was that between the starodumcy („old Duma members“, a group of right-wing deputies ranging from the Black Hundreds to right-wing Octobrists) and the „renovationists“ (who supported a modernization of the city’s administration and economy, and about one third of whom were Constitutional Democrats). At the 1912 elections, the renovationists secured a relative victory; in May 1913, they succeeded in having Count Ivan Tolstoj, a moderate liberal and former Minister of Education, elected mayor. In a declaration adopted on 24 July 1914, the Duma and the mayor it elected set out a patriotic platform. The tone of this declaration was similar to that of thousands of others promulgated across Russia during those days (including the University Council’s text) – the Duma called for „internal peace“ for the sake of victory over a dangerous enemy.30

28 For a brief outline cf. Aleksandr Dmitriev’s Article „The State, the Universities, and the Reform of Higher Education“ in this volume.
29 Vysokoje utverzdenoe 8 iyunja 1903 g. Položenie ob obščestvennom upravlenii g. Sankt-Peterburga [The Regulations of Municipal Administration of St.-Petersburg, Supremely confirmed on June 8, 1903], SPb. 1903. See also: V. A. Nardova, Samoderžavie i gorodskie dумy v Rossiǐ v konce XIX—nàčale XX veka, SPb. 1994, 133, 155; Daniel R. Brower, The Russian City between Tradition and Modernity, Berkeley et al. 1990.
30 Očerk dejateľnosti Petrogradskogo gorodskogo komiteta Vserossijskogo sojuza gorodov [Outline of the Activities of the Petrograd City Committee of the All-Russian Union of Cities], Pg. 1916, no. 1, 14–15.
At the same time, mayor Ivan Tolstoj (like most municipal deputies) was characteristically outraged by those ‘patriotic actions’ that turned into chauvinistic pogroms (e.g. against the German embassy right after the outbreak of war). He was flatly opposed to renaming the capital Petrograd, made himself the advocate of the families of German subjects arrested in the capital, and so forth. On the whole, Ivan Tolstoj conducted a policy of ‘liberal patriotism’ which, as we have seen, was also supported by the University Council. In the All-Russian Union of Cities created in August 1914, Petrograd’s municipal administration acted as an integral part of the opposition movement which, from 1915, supported the Progressive Bloc. The Ministry of the Interior naturally grew increasingly dissatisfied with the City Duma and the mayor, who experienced mounting pressure and criticism in the semi-official press. Thus the City Duma’s situation in the pre-war decades was similar to that of the University’s. Just like the University, the Duma struggled to broaden its own autonomy at the expense of the central authorities. Under these circumstances, an alliance between the town (whose liberal mayor was acquainted with most university professors and, incidentally, had headed the Society of Aid to the Students of Saint-Petersburg University from 1912) and the liberal University Council should have seemed expedient, especially since several members of the University were also City Duma deputies.\footnote{31 Obići\'j i porazrednyj spisok glasnych Sankt-Peterburgskoj gorodskoj Dumy na 1912 g. [General and Rating List of the Saint-Petersburg City Duma Deputies in 1912], SPb. 1912, 1–17; Petrogradskaja gorodskaja duma v 1913–1915 gg. [The Petrograd City Duma in 1913–1915], Pg. 1915, 245–252; „Ličnyj sostav Imperatorskogo S.-Peterburgskogo universiteta 1914 goda“ [The Staff of the Imperial University of Saint-Petersburg in 1914], in: Otvet o sostojanii i dejatel'nostii Imperatorskogo S.-Peterburgskogo universiteta za 1913 god, SPb. 1914, 1–100.}

Despite such propitious conditions, a full-fledged alliance, either political or socio-professional, never developed between the town and the university. The publications and archives of Petrograd’s city administration show that contacts between the University and the municipal authorities were sporadic. In a sense, it was Ivan Tolstoj’s and rector Ėrvin Grimm’s merit that they were more frequent than before. The town participated in setting up a hospital in the University’s building and organizing medical courses at the Faculty of Physics and Mathematics, while members of the university joined representatives of the municipal administration in the Committee to Aid War Victims; similarly, the City Duma debated about the issue of help to drafted students.

Yet Petrograd city authorities devoted much more attention to other educational institutions in the capital, such as the Psychoneurological Institute, the Bestužev Women’s College, the Petrograd Women’s Medical Institute, the Military Medical Academy and the Polytechnic Institute.\footnote{32 See Izvestiya S.-Peterburgskoj Gorodskoj Dumy [Proceedings of the S.-Petersburg City Duma], SPb. (Petrograd) 1913–1917; „Stenogrammy zasedanj 1913–1915, 1917“ [Verbatim records of the sessions of 1913–1915, 1917], in: CGIA SPb. 792/1/10315–10318, 10311.} As we can see, all these institutions were engaged in training medical, teaching and technical staff who were of practical value for the city. As for the University, it had always positioned itself as a corporation whose purpose was to solve global tasks of science and enlightenment. The story
of the attempt to organize a „practical“ medical department at the University on the City Duma’s initiative is revealing in this respect. For four years, from 1913 until 1917, the university essentially ignored the city’s proposals; the discussion would probably have petered out had not the war caused severe shortages of medical staff which rendered the issue of training doctors even more pressing.33

Since the spirit of the university statute drafted by Minister Pavel Ignat’ev did not allow imposing a new department upon the university from above, he chose a different approach: in 1916, he created a branch of Petrograd University in Perm’ which was later turned into an independent university. So-called „medical groups“ at the Faculty of Physics and Mathematics were created in the process, both in Perm’ and in Petrograd. The ministry apparently wanted to persuade the University to open an entire medical department, but the revolutionary upheaval of 1917 interfered with these plans.34

This episode not only reflects the quality of the university’s relations with the municipal and central authorities, but also reveals a lot about its capacity and readiness to respond to social demand. The city authorities’ freedom of action was highly circumscribed, of course, and they could not conduct any direct negotiations with the University, thus bypassing the government. More importantly, however, the very practice of university teaching was not geared to fulfilling any specific social demand. Indeed, the ideals of „university autonomy“ that dominated among the professors were hardly conducive to discussing such demands. A final explanation for the university’s isolationist position was its special privileged status. The capital’s university was in every sense a scholarly institution that occupied the very top of the country’s educational system. This was one of the reasons why relations between the University’s professorial elite on the one hand and the mayor and city administration on the other hand differed from those that the municipal authorities entertained with professors of other institutions of higher education. During the Great War, therefore, Petrograd University formed an ivory tower that was well-sheltered from the winds of social change and wartime exigency by legislation, bureaucratic practice and liberal ideology.

34 CGIA SPb. 14/1/11220, fol. 1–64.
The Collapse of the Ivory Tower

The Bolshevik regime gradually dismantled the old system of Russian higher education. Initially faced with a boycott by the institutions of higher learning, the new authorities were forced to act cautiously, playing a game with the universities and involving the professors in discussions about plans for reforming higher education. However, when the authorities’ plans to impose their own version of a statute upon the educational institutions were rejected, the People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment (Narkompros) moved on to a decisive offensive. Its successive decisions consistently curtailed the universities’ former rights. Some scholars see a certain inconsistency in the Bolsheviks’ policies towards the universities and university autonomy. It might have been a matter of the authorities flirting with social actors who represented a danger to them. The general policy line aimed at establishing control over the universities remained unchanged, however. When the academics did not comply ‘voluntarily’ they were thus forced to do so.

This flirtatious policy disguised the fundamental reorganization of higher education that took place in 1918–1922. A lumpen mass streamed into the student milieu; many professors left or were arrested or exiled; the programmes and structure of the institutions of higher education were reorganized. In July 1922, the Sovnarkom (Council of People’s Commissars) adopted new Regulations Concerning Institutions of Higher Education, stripping them of even the ghost of any autonomy. By early 1923, Petrograd University (just like the country’s other universities) had turned into a purely Soviet institution.

Conclusion

The ideal of autonomy was a direct expression of a broader aspiration to democratize higher education, and it thus reflected the aims of the Russian liberation movement. To a certain extent, under Russian conditions in which stable institutions of civil society were lacking, the idea of the universities’ autonomy from the state turned into the idea of being autonomous from society and ignoring social demands. At the same time, bureaucratization and total state regulation fettered both the university and local self-government, depriving them of real initiative and thereby nurturing a joint opposition to the central authorities rather than cooperation.

Consequently, the University’s patriotism manifested itself not in joint efforts with the urban community to help the front, the economy, or defence, but mostly in journalism and propaganda for internal reforms. The war revealed the capital’s university as an ivory tower. The University was used as a platform for the propaganda of ‘liberal patriotism’, which, in its turn, was an instrument in the struggle for corporative interests.

The years of the Great War revealed the need to reform higher education, especially to make it more responsive to social demand. The time was ripe for an elimination of the gap between the universities' *formal* and *actual* autonomy. In theory this could be achieved either by granting the institutions complete autonomy (and separating higher education from the state) or by entirely stripping the universities of their autonomy (and subjecting them to total state control). The Soviet regime chose the second option. The collapse of the ivory tower in 1917–1923 resulted in changes in the composition of the student body, the status of the teaching community, and curricula. It also abandoned the professors of the capital's university, who had once laid claim to being the intellectual leaders of state and society, to an unenviable fate.