

Final Report Guidelines

TITLE VIII RESEARCH SCHOLAR PROGRAM

TITLE VIII COMBINED RESEARCH AND LANGUAGE TRAINING PROGRAM

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The Fracturing of Tsarist Russia: Criminal Upperworlds and the Great Trials of the 1870s

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Research Abstract

The objective of my research trip to St. Petersburg was to collect archival and rare published sources for my current book-length project. The book addresses crime and punishment in Russia in the wake of the emancipation of the serfs and other "great reforms" of the 1860s. I focus on approximately two dozen high-profile criminal cases that involved violent, white-collar, and political crime, and targeted elite defendants on an unprecedented scale. I argue that the great trials of 1867 – 1882 were central to forming late imperial Russia's legal culture and public discourse more generally, and, in particular, that they attempted to discipline, educate, and even rebuild Russia's upper classes in an age when serf labor was no longer available and modern financial and corporate capitalism was rapidly spreading.

Research Goals

My first goal was to obtain case files related to specific trials and to important legal issues that these trials illustrate. For many of these cases, extensive published trial transcripts are available. However, unpublished archival files are available from the collections of the Ministry of Justice and several other agencies, and my goal was to read these to find out about behind-the-



scenes activities surrounding the cases, including police surveillance of suspects, correspondence among judicial and other officials before, during, and after the trial, as well as petitions and correspondence by defendants before and after their conviction, including their petitions for clemency or pardon. Virtually none of these materials have ever been examined by historians; most are poorly catalogued and many are badly preserved; even those that are easily available constitute a mess of letters, memos and petitions, thus necessitating time-consuming field research.

My second goal was to examine Russia's criminal justice policy, focusing on the layer of official discourse located between codified legislation and its application in court cases. I am interested in how judicial officials and other individuals (law professors, journalists, memoirists, as well as defendants, crime victims and other persons who corresponded with officials) defined and discussed various types of criminal activity and assessed their treatment in Russia's court system that was completely restructured in the mid-1860s. For this purpose, I needed to look at the massive record produced by several government commissions tasked with revising Russia's criminal codes. This process began in 1862 and continued slowly but surely until the end of the imperial period. While ultimately a new criminal code was adopted in 1903 but never fully implemented, its value to historians lies in the extensive discussions and comments on the various drafts collected at different stages from lawyers, laypersons, organizations and government agencies. These comments reveal how Russia's policy-making elites responded to the changes, challenges, and contentions created by the Great Reforms. A related objective was to locate the comments collected annually by the Russian Ministry of Justice after the reformed



courts were opened in 1866 that were intended to assess the performance of the new courts, as well as any flaws in Russia's penal code as revealed in the new courts' practice.

Research Activities and Findings

The bulk of my time in St. Petersburg was spent reviewing and copying the Ministry of Justice files related to some of the most prominent trials from ca. 1866 – 1882. This includes the Nizhnii Novgorod Salt Affair, the Kharkov counterfeiting case, the Swiss Affair, the *Velizarii* steamship explosion, the Tiligul train crash, the Mel'nitskii, Kovner, and Obolenskii fraud cases, and many others. Among these particularly fascinating but previously unexamined materials was the collection of the Ministry of Finance internal investigations of embezzlement by State Bank officials in various branch offices, ranging from Lithuania to Moscow to Eastern Siberia. Equally exciting was the collection of several hundred Council of State case memos involving defendants of noble status. These cases involved the entire range of criminal activity, with theft and embezzlement predominating and often mixed with violent crimes.

Particularly valuable was the collection of documents left by jurist A.F. Koni and housed at the Pushkin House (IRLI). In addition to draft materials by Koni himself (which provide, for example, the full names of individuals that are omitted from published versions), these include key trial records of the kind that did not survive for most criminal cases and were apparently kept by Koni as keepsakes among his personal papers. This is especially important for cases when the defendant was acquitted, therefore leaving no surviving records elsewhere. For several cases, I obtained copies of personal letters that no doubt came from the original investigation files.

In addition to non-political cases, my book will contain materials on several important political investigations and trials from the 1870s that involved similar legal issues and the same



personnel as the "ordinary" cases. This includes the "trial of the 50", the Kazan square demonstration, several propaganda cases, the Nechaev affair, the Odessa incident, the Kherson treasury heist, and the Gorinovich acid attack. I also examined several files recording changing official policy regarding political crime. This includes massive files containing letters and memos sent by various private citizens to the "dictator" Count Loris-Melikov. My objective is to comment on the role of judicial institutions and public trials in these policies and discussions.



For the second broad (albeit subsidiary for my overall project) issue of criminal justice policy, I examined several sets of archival materials. First, I reviewed several dozen files concerning the attempts to draft a new criminal code that would match Russia's procedural laws that were introduced in 1864-66. While many of these materials were eventually published, I found a valuable collection of background papers, initial drafts, as well as raw reports on criminal trials that the reformers solicited and obtained from local judicial officials.



Second, I reviewed some of the legislative history relating to the reform of 1864. While the reform itself is covered in several high-quality studies, I was interested in several issues that are crucial for my project but were left unexamined or, rather, taken for granted, in existing work: the introduction of fully public, adversarial trials, which was not at all predetermined, since all the early drafts of the reform envisioned only limited publicity and adversariality.

Third, with a similar goal in mind I reviewed some of the legislative history relating to the adoption of Russia's first comprehensive criminal code in 1845 (that remained in force until 1917), including drafts, committee discussions, and State Council materials. My objective was to identify debates relating to (a) the treatment of elite or upper-class offenders; (b) distinctions between the three major types of crime: violent; political, and white-collar crime, such as fraud, forgery and embezzlement; and (c) any discussions of the overall conception of criminal trials and any possible suggestions of introducing the elements of adversarial or public procedure in Russia before the 1860s.

Overall, during my trip I photographed tens of thousands of pages of microfilmed and hard-copy materials and placed over 60 orders for scanning and photography, each order ranging from 100 to 250 pages, with one exceptionally large order (from IRLI) exceeding 1,000 pages.

In addition to archival collections, I worked at the newspaper division of the National Library of Russia, examining materials that are difficult or time-consuming to obtain in the United States. Some of these newspapers were scanned but are only available for download onsite (at extremely slow speeds). It is a great shame that several key newspapers of the imperial period are essentially unavailable to scholars in Petersburg. St. Petersburg's most important daily newspaper in the imperial period, *Sanktpeterburgskie vedomosti*, is in poor condition and is not



available to researchers. Surprisingly, it has not been scanned or preserved in plastic sheets as some other, less important papers, have been. Russia's most widely circulated paper, *Novoe vremia*, is only available on microfilm that is of such poor quality as to be essentially unusable.

The two most important challenges I am continuing to encounter in the course of my research are (1) archival policies that are extremely detrimental to any serious and competitive research project; and (2) the poor condition and organization of many collections.

In particular, RGIA's process of ordering and making copies of documents is exceedingly expensive and slow. Researchers can only order 100 pages per day without incurring a massive surcharge, which makes copying longer documents exceedingly time-consuming and expensive even for a scholar with a generous institutional research account. A separate multi-step procedure is involved in ordering every single set of copies. Moreover, some materials have been designated as "special-value" and only available to be scanned at an exorbitant, indeed extortionate price. Moreover, "special-value" files can be worked with only in the separate "little room" with only six seats that are nearly always occupied, as compared to the unnecessarily extensive regular reading room. In virtually every case I can think of, there is no valid scholarly reason for such designation. When I approached several of RGIA's officials and asked for a consultation on how to use my worktime most effectively, they were singularly unhelpful and were either not willing to meet with me at all or appeared to be completely unaware of relevant practices at other countries' archives.

While a tiny portion of RGIA materials is available on microfilm, the archive's microfilm machines are extremely outdated – most importantly, lacking a zoom function - and some microfilms are poorly made or defective.



Yet other materials have been scanned but cannot be downloaded by researchers. Instead, we have to manually take photographs of these materials from pdfs on RGIA's reading room computers, a procedure that is obviously inefficient and makes many materials basically inaccessible due to the poor quality of the scans and due to the fact that smartphone cameras are not designed to take pictures off computer screens. Given that RGIA's collections are indispensable to any historian of pre-1917 Russia, it is essential that those researchers and agencies with the ability to do so point out these flaws to persons/organizations with the ability to change Russia's archival policies.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

My project is directly relevant to current US foreign policy toward Russia and Eurasia because it provides the essential historical background in two areas that are of vital concern for the US policy community: one is the policy and the politics of criminal justice and law enforcement and the other is the development of property-owning elites and more generally of modern financial and industrial capitalism in Russia. As shown by historian David Engerman, the US community of Russia experts has been historically divided between those who focused on the study of specific institutions and ideologies and those who - like George F. Kennan - searched for long-term patterns such as geopolitical factors and enduring national interests and mentalities. My study focuses on the timeless issues of crime, social power, and self-regulation by elites, examined through the lens of a particularly crucial period of Russia's history - that of the serf emancipation and other liberal reforms of the 1860s and 1870s. This analysis will allow policy experts to identify and evaluate long-term trends in Russian political and legal



development, and especially to evaluate the possibilities of strengthening legal institutions and legality in today's Russia.

My first theme of criminal justice and criminal law in Russia is one of the most important current topics in Russian politics, subject to sharp criticism from outside observers, as, for example, in the recent series of revelations of prisoner abuse and a series of prominent politically motivated criminal trials. While Russian criminal justice leaves much to be desired compared to its tsarist predecessor, its politics are arguably more inclusive; as a political entity it borrowed much from the pre-1917 system in terms of symbolism, ideologies, and even specific policies - down to the limited use of public jury trials, and the example of tsarist legal reforms continues to be an important model of development.

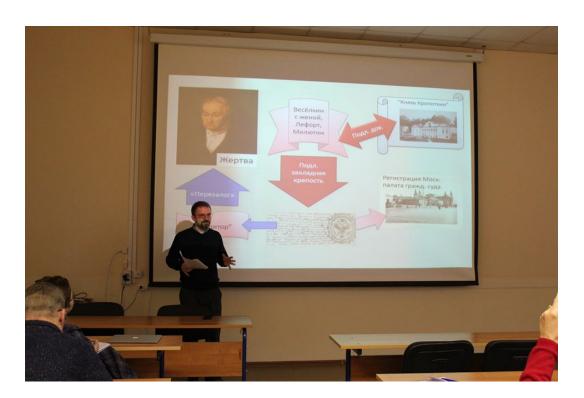
My second related objective of examining Russia's elites and the role of law in their self-constitution and self-regulation is an important theme in Russia's current political discourse. The notion of elites' impotence and disloyalty runs strong in Russia's popular political culture, and is only counterbalanced by the US concern for influencing President Putin's closest associates through economic sanctions. Added to this is a fundamental lack of security in the results of the massive privatization process of the early 1990s. My book adds a historical dimension that explains Russian elites' vulnerable position in the decades before they lost their power to the Bolsheviks; it does so through studying some of the fundamental issues and dilemmas of the times - related to property ownership and control, family structures, and political expression - and tracing how the ruling elites following the serf emancipation attempted to use the newly reformed court system to debate these issues and to reaffirm their authority. While these issues' concrete manifestations are of course different today, the model of a "great trial" examined in my



book remains a powerful one, and my study will help the policy community to be aware of its possibilities and of its potential pitfalls.

Co-Curricular Activity

During my trip to Russia I met and discussed my project with several senior scholars in my field, both in St. Petersburg and in Moscow. All of them were extremely welcoming and generous with their comments and suggestions. Also I very much enjoyed presenting my research at two venues: at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow and at the European University in St. Petersburg. The talks were ca. 60 minutes each and well attended by local scholars and graduate students. For my presentation in Moscow, Prof. Evgenii Akeliev, a leading historian of crime and punishment in Russia (working on the eighteenth century) served as the discussant. On both occasions, I benefitted from extremely helpful questions and comments.





Conclusions

I am extremely grateful for American Councils' support that made this wonderful trip possible. While not without its challenges, the city's archives and libraries are extremely rich and rewarding to any scholar of Russian history. The trip was very productive and I am very much looking forward to finishing the book.

Plans for Future Research Agenda/ Presentations and Publications

The results of this research will constitute the bulk of my book manuscript, currently under contract with Yale University Press and scheduled to appear in 2021. In addition, I will present my findings at several conferences (including ASEEES and ICEEES) and workshops in the US and (after 2020) in Russia. One or two spin-off journal articles will also likely result from this project. Finally, I am planning to continue incorporating my research into my teaching at Yale, including a specialized seminar for first-year students on the "History of Crime and Punishment" to be offered in the fall 2020.

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Otechestvennye zapiski

Peterburgskaia gazeta

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Russkaia starina

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