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**Teachers and their work in the Voluntary Associations of the Eastern Siberian
Cities in the late 19th century**

Eastern Siberian cities of the late 19th century witnessed a large increase in the growth of voluntary associations ranging from educational, technical, agricultural and geographical societies to sports and leisure clubs. By 1897, there were more than 30 actively functioning associations and clubs in Irkutsk, Krasnoyarsk, and Chita. These associations created by the local intelligentsia helped shape an active public sphere, which served as a building block for the emergence of the civil society in the late tsarist Russia.

The teaching professionals of private and public schools played an instrumental role in the founding and functioning of multiple educational associations designed to raise financial aid for the students, expand access to education and vocational training, create new forms of leisure and advance scientific knowledge in the region.

There were several reasons why teachers engaged into the creation and work of the voluntary associations. The second half of the 19th century was a time of fundamental changes in the Russian empire, and the teachers hoped that through public service and collaboration with the local administrators they could soften the autocratic policies of the state and bring an era of progressive civic life into the Siberian cities. By raising the educational and cultural level of general public, the teaching intelligentsia defied the conventional notion of the “Siberian backwardness” and worked collectively to build a progressive and modern society. Teachers also raised public awareness of such issues

as the school's heavy workloads, poor working conditions, and low wages. To break away from the social and intellectual isolation imposed by the school regimen, they started getting engaged in meeting with their peers from other educational institutions and establishing sense of professional camaraderie. Further, some of them entered into the voluntary associations because these started gaining popularity amongst general public. Finally, the teaching professionals strived for the public recognition of their talents and expertise, which they so readily extended to the community.

In the late 19th century, teachers of such large cities of Eastern Siberia as Irkutsk, Krasnoyarsk and Chita founded five prominent voluntary associations, the goals of which were to provide financial aid for the students of local schools and to increase educational and cultural opportunities for the general public. The elementary school teachers were the most active group as they represented 60% of the teaching membership in these associations.¹ The charters for each organization were written by the teachers themselves and, unlike the government-sponsored associations, they were 100% voluntary. Their members payed annual membership fee and met bi-weekly during the school year. The organizers had an authority to recruit new members, elect the board, plan events and allocate funds. By the last quarter of the 19th century, the Russian government came to recognize and rely on such associations to provide education, rational leisure, medical care and infrastructure to the residents of remote regions, which were desperately lacking funds. The government, which was unwilling to change its autocratic rule, nevertheless allowed great degree of autonomy for the

¹ Otchet po ustroystvy besplatnih narodnyh chtenii v Irkutske s 1893 do 1897 g. (Irkutsk, 1898); Otchet o deyatelnosti obshestva dlya okazaniya posobii dlya uchshihsiya Vostochnoi Sibiri. (Irkutsk, 1899); and Vostochnoe Obozrenie, no. 12 (1885).

multitude of urban associations, working towards the goal of national improvement and modernization².

Reacting to the creation of Irkutsk associations, a prominent Siberian ethnographer and historian Grigorii Potanin wrote, "Public of Irkutsk is finally growing out of its administrative swaddling clothes and is beginning to recognizing its human dignity".³

With the help of the local press actively publicizing the work of these societies, their general membership grew tremendously. In 1898, the membership of the Irkutsk Society to Provide Financial Aid for the students of Eastern Siberia stood at 662 people, including 101 teachers, 20 medical doctors and several local administrators, all of whom made up the "active core" of the organization⁴. This and other associations raised money for scholarships, opened up libraries, Sunday and evening schools for the adults and children, and organized educational entertainment, such as multiple public readings, lectures and concerts.

The objective of educational entertainment was to provide the urban population with an alternative medium of leisure, such that could stimulate self-improvement and enlightenment. This objective was met with a great deal of enthusiasm by the local press, which lamented in 1888 that "Siberian leisure consists of playing cards, drinking and brawling and does not satisfy the growing public need for the cultural enrichment".⁵ In 1893, the Irkutsk Society to Provide Financial Aid for the students of Eastern Siberia began organizing regular public readings accompanied by slides. The elementary school teacher Konstantin Chernyakov was elected to carry organizational functions,

² Joseph Bradley. Subjects into Citizens: Societies, Civil Society, and Autocracy in Tsarist Russia. *The American Historical Review*, vol. 107, no. 4, 2002: 1113.

³ G. N. Potanin. *Vospominanya. Literaturnoe Nasledstvo Sibiri.* Tom 7 (Novosibirsk, 1986), 57.

⁴ *Otchet o deyatelnosti obshchestva dlya okazaniya posobii uchashimsya v Vostochoi Sibiri.* (Irkutsk, 1898).

⁵ *Vostochnoe Obozrenie*, no. 18 (1888).

including the selection of readings, advertisement, writing of annual reports and managing of financials. Chernyakov recruited a group of his peers from public and parochial elementary schools of Irkutsk to conduct the readings. From 1893 to 1895, the teachers organized 36 public readings under Chernyakov's leadership. These readings were attended by 7,000 people, which constituted 13% of total population of the city, averaging 200 attendees at each event.⁶ The book titles for the readings were selected from a catalogue of the Ministry of Public Education. In 1891, the Ministry approved 148 titles, but after the teachers' outcry about the scarcity of selection, the Ministry relented and allowed the teachers to read any books, located in the libraries of their schools⁷. The effective collaboration established by the Irkutsk teachers with the local administration ensured success of the public readings. In 1896, with the help of the patron of arts and a prominent member of the Irkutsk Duma Vladimir Sukachev, new auditorium was built for the readings with the maintenance costs carried by the Duma itself.

The readings from Mamin-Sibiriyak, Zhukovsky, Tolstoy, Gogol, Shevchenko, Pushkin, Lermontov and Nekrasov had a great interest amongst public, as well as the lecture about Abraham Lincoln and the slave emancipation in the United States. Incredibly popular among the enthusiasts of agriculture was a series of lectures about botany, delivered by Vasyli Elichev, who taught at the parochial school of Irkutsk in the 1890s. He built a large green house and purchased several acres of land at the outskirts of the city, where he cultivated new varieties of crabapples, pears and plums. In 1897, Elichev sold his orchard and a green house, resigned from the school, and travelled with his

⁶ N. I. Gavrilova. *Obshestvenny byt gorozhan Irkutskoi gubernii vo vtoroi polovine XIX veka.* (Irkutsk, 2014), 140; *Otchet po ustroistvy besplatnyh narodnyh chtenii v Irkutske s 1893 do 1897.* (Irkutsk, 1898), 6-7.

⁷ *Otchet po ustroistvy besplatnyh narodnyh chtenii v Irkutske c 1893 po 1897 gody.* (Irkutsk, 1898), 2.

family to Hawaii to research agricultural practices. While in Hawaii, he wrote a series of letters for the Irkutsk newspaper *Vostochnoe Obozrenie*, published in 1897.⁸

The popularity of readings and the growing public appetite for educational entertainment inspired the teachers and other representatives of local intelligentsia to create in 1897 the Irkutsk Association for the Public Entertainment⁹. The primary objective of the association was the organization of musical and literary concerts, with the proceeds were going to the educational associations and Sunday schools. The public readings and the concerts grew in popularity and formed a new culture of leisure in the Siberian cities. In 1900, the government – which traditionally allowed only the teaching personnel, clergymen and local officials to read to the public – for the first time allowed other groups of people submit applications to become readers¹⁰. The young people who once attended the readings were now given an opportunity to become the readers and carriers of culture themselves.

The associations also opened and supported free Sunday schools for both genders, which were financed through fundraising and charity. As an example, in the 1890s, the Krasnoyarsk association opened seven Sunday schools. All schools were voluntarily staffed by the elementary school teachers, most of whom were young unmarried women.¹¹

The two most prominent Sunday schools of Irkutsk were the elementary technical school and the Sukachev's Sunday school, named after its patron and a member of the Irkutsk Duma Vladimir Sukachev. The schools catered to the teenagers and young

⁸ *Vostochnoe Obozrenie*, no. 145, 147 and 153 (1897).

⁹ *Vostochnoe Obozrenie*, no. 58 (1897).

¹⁰ *Vostochnoe Obozrenie* no. 25 (1900)

¹¹ *Vostochnoe Obozrenie*, no. 3 (1896).

adults of both genders and taught religious instruction, reading, writing, math, carpentry, and sewing. The teachers usually volunteered for two - three months at the time and then were replaced by new volunteers. One of the major educational objectives of Sunday schools was to teach students reading comprehension skills¹². The good readers were often selected by the teachers to read excerpts from the books to their peers at the beginning of the class. They were also encouraged to borrow books from the school library and read to their family members.

Female teachers often took the volunteering at these schools as an opportunity to strengthen their professional standing in the community, while fulfilling their image of an educator. Some of them became highly involved with their pupils and enjoyed great degree of public recognition for their work. But this new experience was not obstacle-free. As one teacher complained, "It is much better to work with young boys all week, than one day with the adult males at the [Sunday School]... They come to school drunk, shout obscenities at teachers and roughhouse".¹³ Despite the challenges, the teachers continued to volunteer and the Sunday schools continued to gain their popularity. They broadened access to the elementary education and provided useful vocational training to the variety of social groups.

In the late 1870s, the Society to Provide Financial Aid for the students of Eastern Siberia took upon itself a role of an organizer of professional gatherings for the elementary school teachers. One of the first congresses of the city teachers was held in Irkutsk in 1859 with only male attendees. However, the Society-sponsored congresses changed this practice and began inviting female teachers to participate. The congresses

¹² Otchet obshestva popecheniya o nachal'nom obrazovanii v Krasnoyarske za 1892. Krasnoyarsk. (1892).

¹³ Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Irkutskoi Oblasti (thereafter GAIO), fond 194, opis 2, delo 187, listy 12-13.

were held separately for the urban and rural teachers of the Irkutsk region. The topics of discussions were centered on the living and working conditions, quality of teaching, parental involvement and the importance of female education in Siberia.¹⁴ The local press covered the meetings and brought the challenges of the elementary schools into the public light. For the longest time, the congresses of elementary school teachers were not regulated by the government; it was only in 1899 when the government finally issued the “Temporary rules pertaining to the congresses of the public elementary schools”. The rules let attendees to present on a variety of topics, but prevented them from creating actions items and introducing regulations. Teachers were told to compile grievances and suggestions and hand them to the school administration¹⁵. In the beginning of the 20th century, the congresses became an integral part of the Russian liberal movement, providing a peaceful civil alternative to the growing political radicalism.

The school administration, while initially suspicious of the congresses’ ideas, gradually came to support them. In 1889, the inspector of the Irkutsk elementary schools publicly praised the work of congresses, referring to their participants as the “new teachers” who diligently carry their civic duties and obligations to serve the local community¹⁶.

The overarching concern expressed by the congress participants centered on the standard of living and low wages for teachers, especially in the rural schools. These concerns spawned the creation of several mutual aid societies. These societies provided short-term loans and grants to its members, helped pay their medical bills and

¹⁴ N.S. Romanov. Irkutskaya Letopis’ 1857-1880. (Irkutsk, 1914), 51-52; and GAIO, fond 194, opis 1, delo 28, list 33.

¹⁵ V.I. Suchkov. Sotsial’nyi i duhovnyi oblik uchitelstva na rubezhe XIX- XX vekov. Otechestvennaya Istorija, no. 1 (1995), 71

¹⁶ Vostochnoe Obozrenie, no. 22 (1889)

provided assistance to the families of deceased teachers¹⁷. Unlike other voluntary associations created by the teachers, they included only peers from other schools. This autonomy contributed to the growing sense of camaraderie and professional conscience and empowered the teaching intelligentsia to advocate for their interests.

In conclusion, as we could see, through their service, teachers created new educational and cultural opportunities for the Siberian residents. They constructed public sphere and rose to the position of the civic leaders. In his book, "Irkutsk and its place in the historical and cultural development of Eastern Siberia", Vladimir Sukachev wrote, "The teaching personnel of Irkutsk schools represents the best part of the local intelligentsia and plays an enormous part in the cultural and intellectual advancement of our society".

¹⁸ This praise demonstrates the recognition of the teachers' role in the society by the local administrators and the amicable relations existing between the two groups in Irkutsk prior to the revolutionary events of 1905. Over time, some urban residents who attended the various educational events and Sunday schools in the Siberian cities evolved from the passive attendees into the creators of culture. Despite the autocratic nature of the tsarist government, the Russian regions saw an emergence of a lively public sphere and associational life, nurtured by the local intelligentsia.

¹⁷ V.I. Suchkov. 71.

¹⁸ V.P. Sukachev. Irkutsk. Ego mesto i znachenie v istorii i kul'turnom razvitii Vostochnoi Sibiri. Irkutsk (1891), 253.