



NATIONAL RESEARCH UNIVERSITY
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**USING DISSERTATION REVIEWS
FOR STUDYING ACADEMIC
CONVENTIONS
(RUSSIA, LATE 19TH – EARLY 20TH
CENTURIES)**

BASIC RESEARCH PROGRAM

WORKING PAPERS

SERIES: HUMANITIES

WP BRP 188/HUM/2020

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At the turn of the XIX – XX centuries scientists focused on the procedure of the dissertation research's scientifically verifications, create expert forms for assessing the quality of scientific work. One of these procedural forms became peer review. The article examines the culture of dissertation reviews at Russian universities in the designated period. The author, using an examples from specific texts of reviews, focuses on the formation of conventions, on criteria for assessing the quality of research, identifies the basic requirements for the degree of scientific texts. The main conclusion of the article is that the assessment texts contributed to the conclusion of academic agreements and their maintenance (retention).

JEL Classification: Z.

Keywords: Russian Empire, reviews, educational traditions, academic degrees, academic culture, university research.

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² The article was prepared within the framework of the HSE University Basic Research Program and funded by the Russian Academic Excellence Project '5-100'.

In 1896 classical philologist Faddey Zelinsky published a review of the doctoral thesis by antiquity researcher Mikhail Krasheninnikov. The reviewer called the dissertation “euphonic considerations [evfonicheskie soobrazheniya]”³ and “heavy artillery of reasoning [tyazhelaya artilleriya umozaklyuchenii]”⁴ and refused to recognize it as a scientific study.

But it was not only about subjective assessment and personal relationships. What makes this review interesting to modern historians are the principles of scientificity the reviewer formulated for the humanities.

In response to the devastating review, Krasheninnikov published a booklet titled “A Strange Scholar, or How and by Whom ‘Scholarly’ Reviews Are Sometimes Written.”⁵ He called Zelinsky “a pushy reviewer [razvyaznyi retsenzent]”, “a martyr of philology [mucheniik filologii]” and “an incompetent scholar [nekompetentnyi uchenyi]”.⁶ “This review provides so much fresh material for getting to know and properly assess Mr. F. Zelinsky as a critic and as a scholar in general (more specifically, as an epigraphist), that leaving this interesting material without consideration would be simply unforgivable, despite all sorts of praise wasted to me by the abovementioned reviewer.”⁷ In what looked like an ‘academic duel’, Krasheninnikov provided consequent and detailed reasoning to support his findings and counter arguments to refute the assertions of his opponent.

These two scholars’ highly emotional polemic texts are a striking manifestation of the culture of academic freedoms that had developed in Russia by that time. In this article I am going to find out how and when the criteria of scientificity came to play a decisive role in the Russian academic community. What did scientificity mean? What role did dissertation reviews play in academic identification? To answer these questions, I will consider reviews in the context of the academic evaluation procedure and hierarchy building by means of academic titles.⁸

While there seems to exist a well-established industry of literary review studies⁹, dissertation reviews still remain on the periphery of researchers’ attention. This is partly due to such texts being more difficult to find.¹⁰ Their publication was not mandatory, and they were published on the

³ Zelinskii, F.F. (1896). *M. Krasheninnikov. Avgustaly i sakral'noie magisterstvo. Issledovanie v oblasti rimskogo munitsipal'nogo prava i drevnostei*. SPb., 1895. In: ZHMNP. Chast' CCCIII. St Peterburg, pp. 400–421.

⁴ Zelinskii, F.F. *M. Krasheninnikov. Avgustaly i sakral'noie magisterstvo*, p. 415.

⁵ Krasheninnikov, M.N. (1896). *Strannyi uchenyi ili kak i kem inogda pishutsia “uchenye” retsenzii. Otvet g. Faddeiu Zelinskomu*. Iur'ev: Tipografiia K. Matisena.

⁶ Krasheninnikov, M.N. *Strannyi uchenyi*.

⁷ Krasheninnikov, M.N. *Strannyi uchenyi*, p. 1.

⁸ Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical discourse analysis: papers in the critical study of language*. New York.

⁹ Examples are: Likhatskii, A.A. (2018). *Osobennosti retsenzii v istoriko-literaturnykh izdaniakh: sluchai "Istoricheskogo vestnika" (nachalo XX veka)*. In: Vestnik Baltiiskogo federal'nogo universiteta im. I. Kanta. Seriya: Gumanitarnye i obshchestvennoye nauki, 1, pp. 65–71; Grinfel'd, V.A. (2015). *Format literaturnoi retsenzii v sovremennoi obshchestvenno-gosudarstvennoi presse*. In: Vestnik SPbGU. Iazyk i literatura, 3, pp. 190–202.

¹⁰ Vishlenkova, E.A. (2015). *Retsenzirovanie kak mekhanizm samoregulirovaniya meditsinskoi professii v Rossii 1830–1840-kh godov*. In: Dialog so vremenem 50, pp. 170–200.

personal initiative of the reviewers only¹¹, and not necessarily in periodicals. In addition, each university kept its records in its own way and had its own rules for archiving them. In some cities dissertation reviews were put into the folders of the university council, in others they were kept in the files of the respective faculties, and in still others they were not kept at all. Sometimes researchers are lucky to discover draft versions of dissertation reviews in scholars' papers.

A few words have to be said here about the notion of review. Being a special genre of academic and literary writing, a review had a set of specific features. As Ivan Klimov points out, one of the main practices of academic reading is a critical attitude towards the material – both oral and written.¹² In a review, the object of study is another text. The reviewer's attention is inevitably drawn to the author of the text reviewed, the context of their scholarly work and their previous academic experience. As a rule, such reviews are written for a narrow circle of specialists in a limited field. The work under examination exists in a social context whose main protagonist is the scholarly community.

Speaking of the specifics of this genre, it is important to emphasize its subjectivity: a scholar evaluates the work presented to them based on their own knowledge, ideas, and personal experience. When writing a review, one instantly broadcasts the momentary state of research in the field, thus giving the review the function of “indicating the current state of affairs.”¹³

During the period under discussion, several official terms were in use to describe different types of evaluative scholarly texts analyzing master's or doctoral dissertations: ‘response [otzyv]’, ‘review [retsenziya]’, ‘opinion [mnenie]’, ‘propositions [polozheniya]’, or ‘objections [vozrazheniya]’. As a rule, they were intended for specialists in the respective field but could also be published for a wider educated audience.

The two types of reviews usually distinguished in the second half of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries were ‘faculty review [fakul'tetskii otzyv]’, which was necessary for the dissertation's author to be admitted to a public disputation, and ‘opponent review [opponentskii otzyv]’, in which the final verdict was formulated, recommending or not recommending the academic degree to be awarded to the author. To determine which type an archival or published text belongs to, the researcher only needs to read the final sentence of the ‘verdict’. In a faculty review, it reads “this work may be admitted as a master's thesis/doctoral dissertation for public defense [etot trud mozhet byt' dopushchen v kachestve

¹¹ Il'ina, K.A. (2016). *Chto pobuzhdalo russkikh professorov pisat' retsenzii: k istorii zhanra*. Moscow: Izdatel'skii dom Vysshei shkoly ekonomiki. (Seriia WP6 «Gumanitarnye issledovaniia»), pp. 9.

¹² Klimov, I.A. «Syroe i prigotovlennoe», ili k apologii retsenzii. In: *Sotsial'naya real'nost'*. 2008. № 1, p. 112. Klimov, I.A. (2008). «Syroe i prigotovlennoe», ili k apologii retsenzii. In: *Sotsial'naya real'nost'*. 1, pp. 112.

¹³ Klimov, I.A. «Syroe i prigotovlennoe», ili k apologii retsenzii, pp. 113–114.

magisterskoi/doktorskoi dissertatsii k publichnoi zashchite].”¹⁴ In an opponent review, it reads “this work is a worthy justification for the author to be awarded a master’s / doctoral degree [trud yavlyaetsya dostoinym osnovaniem dlya togo, chtoby dat’ avtoru iskomuyu stepen’ magistra/doktora].”¹⁵

Reviewing practices in the context of university traditions

In today’s Russian academia the result of a thesis defense is known in advance: dissertations are rarely rejected because complex filters exist that wouldn’t allow a poor dissertation to be presented in a dissertation council meeting. The preparation of a thesis is a multistage process during which its quality is monitored, and the reputation of the institution the applicant belongs to would suffer too strong a blow if their thesis should be turned down.

In the Russian Imperial universities, by contrast, there were almost as many negative reviews and defense results as positive ones. Oleg Morozov, who has studied a public conflict at Kazan Imperial University, believes that negative reviews gave a clearer idea of the current state of science and contributed more to the development of scholarly knowledge than positive ones did.¹⁶

Texts of academic reviews show that criteria of scientificity were changing during the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For example, in 1904 the famous biologist Kliment Timiriazev wrote an extensive critical review of privat-docent Mikhail Golenkin’s¹⁷ doctoral dissertation. The review bore a telling title: “What Requirements Doctoral Dissertations Should Meet.”¹⁸

Timiriazev formulated the academic community’s requirements any writer of a scholarly text should meet: “We have the right to demand from an accomplished researcher (1) the ability to choose and formulate the [research] issue; (2) the ability to use the research tools that science has (if he does not invent his own, new ones); (3) the ability to interpret his findings, i.e., to understand what his research has yielded and whether it has yielded anything at all.”¹⁹

¹⁴ Cf. Russian National Library Manuscripts Department, fond 585, inventory 1, file 1462 (Platonov, S.F. Otzyv o dissertatsii A.E. Presniakova «Kniazhoe pravo v Drevnei Rusi»), fol. 4.

¹⁵ Cf. Russian National Library Manuscripts Department, fond 585, inventory 1, file 1461 (Platonov, S.F. «Baltiiskii vopros v russkoi politike posle Nishtadskogo mira (1721–1725 gg.)» Dissertaciia Polievtova M.A. Otzyv), fol. 9.

¹⁶ Morozov, O. V. (2018). «Grubeishaia bran’», ili Otritsatel’nye reitsenzii na istorii Kazanskogo universiteta v Rossiiskoi imperii. Vysshiaia shkola ekonomiki. Seriia WP6 «Gumanitarnye issledovaniia», p. 3.

¹⁷ Golenkin, M.I. (1896). *Materialy dlia kharakteristiki sotsvetii krapivotsvetnykh*. In: Uchenye zapiski Moskovskogo universiteta. Otdel estestvenno-istoricheskii, 12.

¹⁸ Central Historical City Archives of Moscow, fond 418, inventory 461, file 45 (Protokoly fiziko-matematicheskogo fakul’teta Imperatorskogo Moskovskogo universiteta. 1904 g.).

¹⁹ Central Historical City Archives of Moscow, fond 418, inventory 461, file 45, fol. 33a.

The historiographical section of the thesis under discussion left the reviewer with the conviction that poor knowledge of scholarly literature had led the researcher to false conclusions and lack of novelty and originality: “Thus, the author has no right to claim any originality for his views: it has been found for over half a century in competent sources; forty years ago it was acknowledged in the best-known Russian textbook and now it has to be recognized as prevailing.”²⁰

In the time under study, the volume of a scholarly text was important. “Finally, the length of the dissertation,” Timiriazev stated, “does not testify to a significant amount of efforts spent on it, especially since, scrawny as it is (115 pages), it contains a number of facts and arguments that are repeated two or three times.”²¹ It should be noted that as early as the 1850s, the average volume of dissertations at Moscow and St Petersburg universities exceeded 200 pages, and since the 1860s this trend has also spread to regional schools.²² The defense of Golenkin’s thesis took place in 1904, when the volume of doctoral dissertations sometimes exceeded 800 pages. Naturally, a 115-page-long work looked unconvincing against the background of such treatises.

In 1880–1890s several schools of thought took shape in Russian universities. This self-organization of researchers led to segregation among applicants for scholarly degrees, to increased competition between them, and, as a result, to high-quality and voluminous dissertations (actually monographs) being submitted for public discussion.

Even more important than the volume of a thesis was its argument being logical and free of contradictions: “On top of it, the thesis is written extremely carelessly,” Timiriazev continued to smash the dissertation, “Whole pages strike as devoid of any logic, which the author himself finally admits. Wouldn’t it have been better for him to refrain from writing them in the first place?”²³

The scholarly community disapproved researchers confining themselves to a single type of primary sources. The diversity of sources drawn upon was regarded as conducive to a more comprehensive consideration of the issue under study. Therefore, historian Sergey Platonov noted, when discussing a book by his colleague Nikolai Chechulin, that “the introduction to the book shows that all the reader can expect from this study is a systematization of data found in urban administration records. In other words, the author works with only one type of [source] material.”²⁴

²⁰ Central Historical City Archives of Moscow, fond 418, inventory 461, file 45, fol. 33b.

²¹ Central Historical City Archives of Moscow, fond 418, inventory 461, file 45, fol. 33d v.

²² The pre-1917 Russian dissertation culture is studied by Cheliabinsk-based historians, e.g. Alevras, N.N., Vydrin, O.V., Grishina, N.V. (2019). *Dissertacionnaia kul'tura rossiiskikh universitetov XIX – nachala XX veka*. In: *Vestnik Rossiiskogo fonda fundamental'nykh issledovanii. Gumanitarnye i obshchestvennye nauki*, 2, pp. 100–110.

²³ Central Historical City Archives of Moscow, fond 418, inventory 461, file 45, fol. 33d v.

²⁴ Russian National Library Manuscripts Department, fond 585, inventory 1, file 6190 (Platonov, S. F. «Goroda Moskovskogo gosudarstva v XVI veke», monografiia N.D. Chechulina. Retsenziia.), fol.1 v.

Lacking other types of sources, Chechulin “followed, so to speak, his material and depicted only those aspects of urban life which were covered by the records and only to the extent this main source allowed”, according to Platonov.²⁵

Because the researcher was proceeding from the source rather than from a research issue, the research tasks were predefined and dictated by the source material available, setting him narrow limits. Therefore, even the volume of the dissertation depended on the size of the document the researcher was drawing on.

The dual identity of a university professor as an instructor and a scholar determined the character of review’s components. A review was as if divided into two parts. The first part described the making of the author as scholar (here the reviewer acted as his teacher). The second part analyzed the points he was making in the thesis presented (in this part, his professor acted primarily in his capacity as a researcher). Sergey Platonov’s reviews of his students’ master’s theses exemplify this structure.

For example, in a review written for the disputation of his student Ivan Lappo’s work, Platonov clearly identified these two roles: “I shall not say much. First, a student whose accomplishments one can enjoy and challenge brings a special pleasure. Secondly, the book undoubtedly deserves a degree: the sprouts from which it grew have been developing in front of my eyes and in front of the eyes of the whole faculty for many years. The works on the fashionable historical issue were carried out in archives with amazing consistency and calm energy. The work brought [its author] visible satisfaction and aroused love for the subject. Therefore, I have no doubt that we are dealing with a truly scholarly work, which is written not just for getting the degree.”²⁶

In 1909 the newspaper *Russkie Vedomosti* published a review of the Moscow historian Mikhail Bogoslovskii’s doctoral thesis “The Zemstvo Self-Government in 17th Century Northern Russia.” This publication appeared in connection with the defense of the thesis. The reviewer who signed as S. M-v probably was historian Sergey Melgunov.

The reviewer stressed that the study under discussion drew on new archival sources, which he believed entitled the book to be reckoned among the most prominent historical works of its time.²⁷ Among other things, it is very interesting to see what the reviewer said of references: the dissertation, he wrote, would “be of great interest not only to specialists in Russian history. We would like therefore to express a wish that the author would take into account the interests of this

²⁵ Platonov, S. F. «Goroda Moskovskogo gosudarstva v XVI veke», monografiia N.D. Chechulina. Retsenziia, fol. 2.

²⁶ Russian National Library Manuscripts Department, fond 585, inventory 1, file 1460 (Otzv v Platonova na dissertaciiu I.I. Lappo), fol. 2.

²⁷ Archives of the Russian Academy of Sciences, fond 636, inventory 1, file 104 («Pomor’e v XVII v.»). Retsenziia za podpis’iu «S. M-v» na knigu M.M. Bogoslovskogo «Zemskoe samoupravlenie na russkom severe v XVII v.»), fol.1.

other category of his readers. A scholarly work requires details and references, which substantiate the points he makes, but at the same time make the reading more complicated. Given Mikhail Bogoslovskii's ability to present his subject matter in a vivid and literary way – which is so valuable a merit for a scholarly work – he could have transferred part of his vast body of references to footnotes and appendices without any detriment. This would enable his interesting and valuable book to reach an audience beyond academia.”²⁸

The call for popularization of science was a mixed blessing at the time.²⁹ Such advice was given either to researchers limiting their studies to very narrow topics or to scholars whom their colleagues considered not to be truly academic. What Melgunov meant, however, was the importance of presenting complex scientific matters in a simple way adapted to readers' capacities. If historians do this, he believed, it would allow to expand the readership for books on Russian history.

Different requirements were implied in Professor Nikolsky's review of Pavel Zabelin's work “Protopope Avvakum and His Role in the Schism”, presented in 1888 for the candidate's degree in theology. In the reviewer's opinion, Zabelin's work showed a large number of historical and chronological inaccuracies, which significantly lowered the quality of his research. The reviewer pointed to a number of gaps in the author's portrayal of Avvakum as the creator of the schismatics' program. Today, we would consider such shortcomings fatal for a dissertation, but they did not prevent Nikolsky from assessing Zabelin's thesis as satisfactory. The gaps he noted in it were offset by the fact that “the author diligently studied the literature on his subject matter and formed a correct view of Protopope Avvakum's life and work as well as of his role in the Schism.”³⁰ It is important that Nikolsky emphasizes the fact that he is quite satisfied with the linguistic quality of the work: “The language of the work is correct, at times even artistic: it is clear, lively, and vivid.”³¹

The ability to explain complex things in a comprehensible manner was valued among natural scientists. In his review of mathematician Konstantin Andreev's doctoral dissertation “On Geometric Conformities as Related to Construction of Curves”³², the reviewer emphasized its “wonderful, distinct, clear and precise language. Reading it is not, as is often the case, hard, tedious, and sometimes poorly remunerated work, but rather a pleasure that accompanies the

²⁸ Archives of the Russian Academy of Sciences, fond 636, inventory 1, file 104, fol. 1.

²⁹ This point is attested to by the abovementioned argument between Zelinsky and Krasheninnikov on whether the language of the latter's thesis was too complicated.

³⁰ Zhurnaly zasedanii Soveta S.-Peterburgskoi dukhovnoi akademii za 1888–1889 uchebnyi god. St. Petersburg, Tipografiia A. Katanskogo i Ko., p. 40.

³¹ Zhurnaly zasedanii Soveta S.-Peterburgskoi dukhovnoi akademii za 1888–1889 uchebnyi god, p. 41.

³² Central Historical City Archives of Moscow, fond 418, inventory 461, file 65 (Delo fiziko-matematicheskogo fakul'teta imperatorskogo moskovskogo universiteta «O dopushchenii dotsenta Khar'kovskogo Universiteta Konstantina Andreeva k zashchishcheniju dissertatsii dlia polucheniia stepeni doktora chistoj matematiki). 23 ff.

All we know is that the review was written by a full professor. His name was impossible to find out.

acquisition of a lot of important and interesting knowledge.”³³ By virtue of its detailed but clear presentation of the topic, the reviewer recommended for this dissertation on higher geometry to be read not only by accomplished mathematicians, but also by beginners.

Reviewers could confirm their own subjective judgments by reference to other experts, citing, for example, a competition that was won by the author or a prize he had been awarded. Such competitions and awards were common academic practice at the time. For instance, when evaluating mathematician Pyotr Pokrovsky’s doctoral thesis, his reviewer stressed that the Department of Mathematics had awarded the master’s thesis of this applicant the Brashman Prize.³⁴

Some applicants revisited the established stereotypes. In 1894, for example, candidate of theology Evgeny Akvilonov submitted for his master’s degree a thesis titled “The Church. An Analysis of Scholarly Definitions of the Church and the Apostolic Teaching on the Church as the Body of Christ.” Based on this title, the reviewer Alexander Katansky wrote: “...one of the main purposes of the work is already clear. The author would like to draw attention to the inaccuracy and inadequacy of our scholarly theological definitions of the Church.”³⁵ This formulation would have been a negative assessment, had Akvilonov not added that Katansky’s goal was not revision and destruction of the prevailing views, but “showing to all kinds of religious dissenters the necessity for unification with the Orthodox Church, the only true church, the only reliable Ark of Salvation.”³⁶

This was a noble task, from the Church’s point of view. The author’s goal was not so much a scholarly as a practical one, because essentially his work was aimed at education and conversion of representatives of various sects, schismatics and non-Christians, their unification under the rule of the Russian Orthodox Church, that is, missionary work. Arguably, by formulating this goal for his dissertation Akvilonov protected himself against criticism and predetermined the outcome of the evaluation of his thesis.

* * *

Summing up, from the middle of the 19th century on, reviewers took into account conventional criteria for assessing the quality of research. One important criterion was the requirement of cumulativeness, ie accumulation of scholarly knowledge, which was reflected in the applicant’s

³³ Central Historical City Archives of Moscow, fond 418, inventory 461, file 65, fol. 3 v.

³⁴ Central Historical City Archives of Moscow, fond 418, inventory 461, file 65, fol.1 v.

³⁵ Zhurnaly zasedanii Soveta S.-Peterburgskoi dukhovnoi akademii za 1893–1894 uchebnyi god. St. Petersburg, Tipografiia A. Katanskogo i Ko., p. 105.

³⁶ Zhurnaly zasedanii Soveta S.-Peterburgskoi dukhovnoi akademii za 1893–1894 uchebnyi god, p. 105.

analyzing the findings of his predecessors. Based on this, the researcher and the reviewer determined the degree of scholarly novelty of a dissertation. In parallel, the reviewers questioned the relationship between emerging trends and the classical scholarly paradigm. The reviews reflected academic debates about the relevance of some research methods or others, on the semantics of terms and concepts, and on the representativeness of the source material on which the dissertations under discussion drew.

Because cumulation and novelty were valued, researchers expanded their dissertations, seeking to mention all their predecessors' works and formulate their own contribution to this body of research. This was encouraged by the reviewers.

However, this intention was in conflict with the new social function of scholarship in the Russian Empire. When agreeing on the requirements for dissertations and their academic quality, academics raised the question of who was supposed to be their audience. The urge to popularize the knowledge produced by dissertation authors manifested itself in reviewers' special attention to the style and form of presentation of complex issues. All in all, the reviewers wanted a dissertation to be both theoretically and historically rich and at the same time accessible to non-academics.

In academic self-organization, reviews served as inclusion/exclusion tools: they defined the boundaries between disciplines and specialties, schools of thoughts, and universities. Apart from evaluation of dissertations, reviews helped to establish and maintain (uphold) academic conventions and, by doing so, they played the role of custodians of scholarly identity. In this way, reviewing created a space for scholarly dialogue aimed at revisiting and reasserting scholarly and professional values.

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