

### The use of collective biography in research on the imperial Russian civil service

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Walter M. Pintner

## The Use of Collective Biography in Research on the Imperial Russian Civil Service

In the light of the central importance that the state and its officials have had from the very earliest period of Muscovite history, it may appear surprising that only during the past ten to fifteen years have 20th century historians devoted serious attention to problems relating to the nature and development of officialdom. The explanation for this neglect is, however, relatively simple. Since the revolution of 1917 scholars, both within and outside of the Soviet Union, have been preoccupied with that event. Emphasis, from one perspective or another, was placed upon the worker and peasant movements or the condition of those groups, on the development of radical ideologies, or on the problems and ultimate failure of moderate views and programs. Soviet scholars, except those dealing with very early periods, were not interested in the discredited institutions of Tsarist autocracy, and Western scholars were more concerned with why liberalism did not succeed, than in finding out how the Tsarist regime and society actually functioned for half a millenium.

This situation has changed markedly in the past ten to fifteen years with the appearance of an important number of studies, both in the U.S.S.R. and in the West, which have been ably discussed by Professor Orlovsky in an excellent review article<sup>1</sup>. These studies have dealt with both the structure and operation of Tsarist governmental institutions and with the personnel who staffed them. It is in the studies dealing with staffing that quantitative methodology, namely collective biography, has come to be employed. Before passing to the quantitative study of official careers we should note, however, that the institutional, legal and ideological milieu of officialdom has been exhaustively analyzed by Torke for the first half of the 19th century but for other periods we lack studies of comparable quality and depth<sup>2</sup>.

On the quantitative side, serious work has been done on the 17th, 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries, for the bureaucracy as a whole, and to a lesser extent for important parts of it, such as the main central agencies, provincial agencies, and also

<sup>1</sup> Orlovsky, Daniel T., Recent Studies on the Russian Bureaucracy, in: *The Russian Review*, 35 (1976).

<sup>2</sup> Torke, Hans J., *Das Russische Beamtentum in der ersten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts*, in: *Forschungen zur osteuropäischen Geschichte*, 13 (1967).

for specific ministries such as Justice, Interior, or State Domains. Some work has encompassed all levels, from the highest to the lowest; other studies have concentrated on elite groups of one kind or another.

Why has there been such an extensive development in this field in recent years? In part it is due to the general increase in the use of quantitative approaches to historical studies, but in the case of Russian history it primarily reflects the existence of a gaping hole in our knowledge of Russia, and, like nature, historians abhor a vacuum. Little more than a decade ago professional Russian historians had no solid bases for statements they made about the official class. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that many had no better knowledge of the subject than a casual reader of Gogol's famous story, *The Overcoat*, whose pathetic hero, Akakii Akakievich, had come to personify the Russian official in most people's minds for lack of any alternative image. The second major reason for the rapid progress of quantitative studies of Russian officialdom is that, once historians began to look for it, very large amounts of data were to be found. Russia has had a centralized, record-keeping government at least since the fifteenth century and the close relationship of state service to social status and what eventually came to be recognized as the nobility ensured that vast amounts of paper and ink were used in establishing the credentials of state servants.

Of course, by no means all of the documents created have been preserved, but enough survive to permit serious work to have been undertaken at least from the early 17th century forward and possibly even earlier. Officialdom was not the creation of Peter the Great, but in the 18th century the number of officials greatly increased, and so too does the availability of records dealing with them. In the 1750's the Empress Elizabeth ordered a full census of all officials and the results of that survey have recently been analyzed by the late S. M. Troitskii in a study published in Moscow in 1974, the first major Soviet work on the Imperial period to make extensive use of the life histories of officials<sup>3</sup>. The census of officialdom of Empress Elizabeth was a one-time thing, never to be repeated, but in the late 18th century more methodical and extensive records began to be kept by the Heraldry Office, the agency charged with determining who was, and was not, a member of the nobility. From the 1790's on all agencies were obliged to supply the Heraldry Office annually with a full description of each of their employees, a description that included substantial information, not only on the official career but also the general life history of the official. These were the *formuliarnie spiski* or personnel records. Most of them have perished over the years, but enough have survived to permit extensive research on many aspects of officialdom in the first half of the 19th century. The Heraldry Office was abolished at mid-century, but the *spiski* continued to be compiled in the same form as they had been in the 18th century. In the second half of the 19th century, most of the information contained in them was published in lists of officials, sometimes arranged by rank and sometimes by agency. In short,

<sup>3</sup> Troitskii, S. M., *Russki absolutium i dvorianstvo xvii v, formirovanie biurokratii*, Moscow 1974.

extensive data are available on Russian office holders down to the revolution of 1917, although there is no guarantee that a particular agency in a particular year will be available, particularly in the first half of the century.

What do these personnel files contain? In good bureaucratic fashion more and more information was required as the years went by. From the 1840s on the amount of data included is particularly impressive. Personal information includes name, age, religion, marital status, name of wife if living, number and ages of children, religion but not social origin of wife, detailed information on real property, serfs, uninhabited rural land, and urban real estate. They even specify whether houses are stone, wooden, or wooden with stone foundations. Furthermore, property holding is broken down by husband and wife, and in terms of method of acquisition, inherited or acquired and includes the holdings of the official's parents, if they were living. The only item of personal data that is not included is place of birth, even the location of the estates listed is rarely given. This omission surely is a result of the long-standing centralization of the Russian state and the absence of local loyalties among the nobility.

However, the main function of these personnel files was not to present economic and demographic data, but to record the service of the official to the state. Here the record is extremely detailed. It usually begins with the highest level of education reached by the individual and then proceeds to record every position, promotion, award, and pay raise he received in his entire career. If he served in the army at any time special attention is given to any occasion when he „came into direct contact with the enemy“. There is also space to record all extended leaves of absence and finally the official's current rank, job, and pay, including allowances for housing and meals, if any are included. The record of a senior official with many years of service can easily amount to a booklet of 40 to 50 large folio pages all carefully written out in elegant script. Even a junior clerk's file fills four or five pages. Since every agency was required to submit a new set every year, for every employee included in the table or ranks, one can immediately see what many of the clerks did all year long; they copied out last year's service records, adding a year to the official's age and including any new posts he had achieved.

If one is interested only in the officials serving in the nineteenth century, one could hardly ask for more detailed information, and it is available for a wide variety of agencies, both central and provincial, although not for all. The only major lack in terms of the questions likely to interest Russian historians is any indication of how long standing the official's membership in the nobility was. A man listed as „from the nobility“ could be the son of commoner ennobled through service or from a noble family of many generations. There are ways to approach this problem, but none are entirely satisfactory.

Historians, however, by their very nature are inclined to look at change over time, and here very significant problems arise when using the *spiski*. Those compiled prior to the 1840s, although the same in basic format and purpose, are far less detailed. For the social historian the most serious omissions are the property holdings of the official's parent, and the education of the official prior to his entrance

into service. When parent's property holding is omitted it becomes impossible to separate the son of wealthy parents who has yet to inherit the family estates, from the landless noblé, of which there were many. Troitskii, working with the 1755 census of officials had even greater difficulty, because 22 percent of his officials did not even report their social origin. Through elaborate and exhaustive examination of each individual case (some 1,214 in all) he was able to determine their probable social origin with reasonable certainty, a task possible only for a scholar with continuous and unrestricted access to the archival sources<sup>4</sup>. Western scholars who have the opportunity to use archival material for necessarily restricted periods of time must turn to other strategies or do without.

What kinds of questions have been dealt with on the basis of this material? We can examine the nature of the official career at different times. Was it purely civil? Mixed civil and military? What kind of movement among agencies was there in the course of a career? What training, if any, preceded actual employment and at what age did men typically start their careers? Without going into details we can say that it has become clear from recent work that in the course of the century from 1750 to 1850 the character of the official career in Russia fundamentally transformed, a fact that could only have been established through extensive use of quantitative materials. Legal sources, readily available in the *Complete Code of Laws of the Russian Empire*, at times represent an expression of what policy makers desired, and in other instances, a ratification of developments that were already in effect. An excellent example of the latter phenomenon has developed through the examination of career records which show clearly that formal, institutionalized education became the norm for civil officials well before it was required by law in the early 19th century.

A second category of problems relates to the personal background of the official, his social origin, religion, and economic position. There are a host of obvious questions that spring to mind. Were high-ranking officials always nobles; if so, were they landed nobles? Did non-nobles who rose in service to high-ranking posts acquire landed wealth? Were certain agencies the preserve of nobles and others not? Did social origin affect career success for men with comparable education? And so forth. All of these matters and many similar ones have been dealt with on the basis of data derived from the service records in an attempt to locate the official in the totality of the Russian social system<sup>5</sup>.

The third category of data, that relating to material status and the numbers, sex, and ages of children has, as yet, been little used except in connection with the property holdings of officials' wives. The data on children, which are extensive in mid-nineteenth century files, have not even been collected. For someone with experience

<sup>4</sup> Troitskii's discussion of the problem is some seventy-three pages long. Troitskii, op. cit., pp. 180-253.

<sup>5</sup> These questions and many others will be dealt with in the forthcoming volume: Pinter, Walter M., and Rowney, Don K. (eds.), *Russian Officialdom: The Bureaucratization of Russian Society from the Seventeenth to the Twentieth Century*, Chapel Hill 1979.

in family history or demography this material may present opportunities that are not apparent to those primarily interested in social and administrative history who have worked with this material thus far.

The methods that have been used in collecting and analyzing the data from the service records have been relatively straight-forward and little attempt has been made to apply highly complex or sophisticated statistical techniques. The actual collection of the data, if archival material is involved, is simple but extremely time-consuming. The records are arranged so that the basic social, economic and demographic data can be quickly noted from the first two pages. However, recording career data such as the date of entrance into service, the date of achievement of specific ranks, receipt of awards, transfers from one agency to another, and so forth can frequently require reading through many pages of information. Details on careers have therefore been collected only for relatively small groups of high ranking officials. For large studies involving thousands of officials the data used have been limited to current rank and agency of employment and the date, level, and agency of first employment.

The processing of material has been carried out in the manner now familiar to most historians concerned with quantitative materials. The information is coded, put on punch cards and then, usually, on to tape for analysis via a computer. The basic technique used in working with the data has been cross-tabulation, broken down in innumerable ways by using different sub-groups. Even the calculation of such a simple statistic as the average age of officials is aided immeasurably by the computer when thousands of cases are involved and many sub-groups are being compared. To a limited extent, scholars using the data on Russian officials have employed other statistical techniques, correlations and analysis of variance and covariance. The limited use made of more sophisticated statistical techniques can perhaps be explained in many instances by the lack of statistical sophistication of the researchers. But it is certainly not true of everyone in the field. It seems to be true in most instances so far that the important conclusions can be derived from the data through careful working over of the material using only the most elementary tools. The more advanced approaches have, as yet, only conformed and stated in more concise form conclusions already evident from more simple-minded approaches. This does not mean that there is no room for high-powered statistical tools in the study of the life-histories of Russian officials; there may well be, but they clearly have not played a major role thus far. One great advantage of the present state of affairs is that everything written about Russian officials remains accessible to all historians, not only those with extensive training in statistical analysis.

Some of the specific problems that have come up thus far may illustrate both opportunities and the limitations inherent in the kind of data that are in the service records. Perhaps the most serious problem for an historian attempting to examine trends over any extensive period of time is, as already mentioned, the lack of important data in the records for the earlier periods. To a significant extent this problem can be overcome by grouping officials according to the date they entered service, when using the extensive information available on men in service in the

mid-nineteenth century. Thus, several thousand officials serving in the 1850's can be arranged in „year of entrance cadres“, and these cadres can then be compared in terms of important variables such as inherited property, education, and so forth, which are not available in the service records compiled early in the nineteenth century. Since men began service in their teens at the beginning of the century and served till their sixties one can go back about forty years using this technique. It does, of course, bias the sample in favor of the long-lived and those who do not retire early.

Another way to deal with the problem of missing information is to find some other kind of data that can effectively act as a substitute. Neither nationality nor place of birth were recorded in the service records. It is usually possible, however, to recognize the foreign born from other features of their service record, their place of education, or the like. However, the major group of non-Russians in Imperial service were from the minority groups within the empire, particularly the Baltic Germans and the Poles. One possible way of identification would be through their names, but this approach presents serious difficulties because of the very substantial amount of cultural „Russianization“ that had taken place over the centuries during the expansion of the empire. Nevertheless, if a better alternative had not been available, it could have been attempted. Fortunately, religion was consistently reported on all service records and it is a reasonable assumption that the Lutherans were mostly Germans from the Baltic provinces and that the Catholics were Poles. Some of the orthodox may well have been of German or Polish background, changing their religious designation for reasons of convenience or of conviction. Therefore the use of religion as a substitute for nationality may tend to undercount the non-Russian element to some extent. It would be possible to classify officials in terms of their names' presumed national origin and see how well that grouping matched one made on the basis of religion. This would produce an estimate of the orthodox officials of non-Russian background. The effort involved for a large scale attempt of that kind does not seem justified. In the case of a detailed examination of a single ministry it might well be worthwhile.

Except in the relatively rare instances where data on an entire population are both available and of manageable size, the researcher is faced with the problem of the „typicality“ of the material at his disposal. The techniques of random sampling are well established and can be applied in cases where total populations are available. Historians, however, are frequently confronted with „accidental samples“ and the collection of service records in the Central State Historical Archive in Leningrad is a perfect case in point. Some time in the late 19th century most of the enormous mass of service records (every employee, every agency, every year) that had accumulated for perhaps seventy-five years was discarded. Clearly nobody ever consulted them. When you turn the pages on the surviving examples, the sand used to blot the ink falls off and piles up on the table. There is no apparent rhyme or reason to what survives among 22,716 individual items that remain, according to the official archival guide. Many of them are files on a single individual. Others are huge volumes nearly two feet thick with all the files of a ministry for a given year, but

sometimes only volume one of a two or three volume set survives. Someone started to put the individual service records into alphabetical order by the officials' surname, but without regard to date or agency of service. Fortunately for contemporary quantitative historians this misguided effort was abandoned only a few letters down the alphabet from „A“.

There do survive a considerable number of files for whole ministries or at least departments of ministries. For a given agency one can then deal with a total population. Sampling is not indicated, for the numbers are not that large. But if one is interested in making generalizations about Russian officialdom as a whole there is no statistical way one can assess the typicality of a given group of agencies. One must rely on qualitative data and historical common sense. If, for example, you are interested in the prevalence of retired military men in the civil service and you have data for several civil departments, but not the Ministry of War, the figure you get must be regarded as a probable minimum. If you have a fairly diverse group of agencies and, with respect to some variable, they are very similar, the likelihood is strong that the agencies you do not have will also be similar failing any particular reason to the contrary.

This is all very obvious, but the point is that all the data in the world about the Ministry of the Interior will tell you nothing about the civil service as a whole unless you have some knowledge of that ministry and the other agencies of the day that permits you to evaluate the data. A similar problem arises when making comparisons over long periods of time. Agencies come and go, and, to some extent, so do actual functions. „Comparable“ groups of agencies fifty years apart can, at best, be approximate.

A special problem in the case of the Russian civil service, but one that may have its counterpart elsewhere, is the existence of parallel hierarchies of ranks and offices. Ranks, conveniently numbered from 1 to 14, are enticingly easy to use quantitatively because every official had one and it is clearly listed on his record, along with all his prior ranks, dates he achieved them, and so forth. The hierarchy of offices is less easily accessible. Jobs are named or described in the individual's service record, but to determine the job's place in the hierarchy one must turn to the legislation establishing the agency involved. Nevertheless, particularly for the late 19th century, it is becoming clear that the hierarchy of offices was functionally more important than that of ranks and scholars are beginning to deal with this question.

Finally, and for much of the research on the Russian civil service, the most serious problem is how can the social origin of an official be determined more than one generation back? The service records indicate the status of the official's father but nothing more. Given the nature of the Russian system it is of crucial importance to make some judgment as to how many sons of nobles are sons of long-term nobles, and how many of recently ennobled men. With small elite groups it is possible to undertake careful geneological and biographical research, going beyond the simply service record. Professor Meehan-Waters has done this exhaustively for the *Generalitet* of the 18th century<sup>6</sup>. For anything but the most restricted groups this is a terribly tedious process with dubious prospects of success. The basic biographical



encyclopedia for Imperial Russia was compiled in the late 19th century, and some volumes of the alphabet were not complete before the revolution and were never published. Distinction in government service was only one of many reasons for inclusion so it tends to bias a group drawn from it toward those with distinction in science or the arts, men for whom government service was possibly a secondary or incidental career. Meticulous archival research like that of Troitskii over a long period can provide much of the missing information but that is extremely difficult for non-Soviet scholars to arrange. The best one can do in terms of overall judgment on the mass of officialdom is to look at the other data available and make reasonable deductions from it. In this case the information on property holdings shows the existence of a large group of officials from totally landless families, strongly suggesting that many, if not most, of them were descended from relatively recently ennobled civil officials or military officers.

What are the major tasks still undone using collective biography techniques as a way of studying Russian officialdom? As mentioned above, the data on marriage and children have not been seriously examined by qualified people. In the area of administrative and social history we now have a fairly good general picture of the nature of Russian officialdom from as early as the 17th century down to the revolution of 1917 and, at least to some extent, into the Soviet period. What is only beginning to be done, notably by Professors Rowney and Orlovsky for the Ministry of the Interior, is to look carefully at the staff of specific agencies over a relatively short period of time and begin to relate changes in personnel, patterns of promotion, transfers in and out of service and so forth to government policy and other major events in the society at large. We are not interested in the nature of the civil service for its own sake but because it was part of a larger picture of Russian development. The collective study on the life histories so diligently and massively recorded collected by generations of Russian clerks is only a beginning, but an essential one, for solidly based understanding of what the Imperial Russian government actually was, and what it could and could not do.

<sup>6</sup> Meehan-Waters, Brenda, *The Muscovite Noble Origins of the Russians in the Generalitet of 1730*, in: *Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique*, 12 (1971).