On February 18th, 2016, Professor Igor Fedyukin delivered a lecture entitled “Prozhektery: Educational Innovation as an ‘Administrative Enterprise’ in Russia from Peter I to Putin.” Fedyukin is Associate Professor of History at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow. He has also worked as a reporter and editor at several prominent Russian newspapers, and he served as a deputy minister of education and science of Russia from 2012-2013. He is a Woodrow Wilson Fellow for the 2015-2016 academic year, and is currently working on a monograph on the emergence of modern schools in the first half of the 18th century in Russia during the reign of Peter the Great.

Fedyukin began by characterizing the prevailing narrative of educational history in Russia as one of the state’s creation of schools based on military need: by training officers, sailors, and engineers, the creation of schools also created highly educated armed forces personnel. Such institutions were established by the state in accordance with imperial decrees, and were run by government-appointed officials. When these schools began to emerge in the 18th century, however, there was no government ministry or official bureaucratic apparatus in place to oversee their creation. Instead, this process is attributed to the grand design of Peter the Great. Peter is often envisioned as an “entrepreneur-in-chief,” a ruler who “put things in place” and was responsible for their design (and Fedyukin acknowledged that in some cases, his instructions could indeed be “unimaginably detailed”). According to this view, these new educational institutions emerged through Peter’s personal vision and command. Fedyukin points out a serious flaw in this narrative: although Peter was indeed “a great enthusiast of learning,” he didn’t write very much about schools.

Peter is famous for his 1714 decree on the establishment of “cipher schools,” in which he ordered that nobles should be instructed in mathematics before being allowed to marry. The experienced official tasked with enacting this decree complained to his superior, writing, “This decree is obscure [mrachen] and without many of the conditions that should be there in order for us to implement it.” In this and other educational decrees, Fedyukin argues, Peter failed to provide the details which are needed to bring any such broad vision to fruition.

This gap, “between Peter’s broad enthusiasm for learning and those nitty-gritty details which have to be defined” in order to build a new institution, created the room for people to pursue different strategies. “Some people saw an opportunity for self-promotion, to invent jobs for themselves and their clients, to grab resources and authority,” Fedyukin calls such people “administrative entrepreneurs,” and he argues that the institutions of the early modern state came into existence through their efforts.

Administrative entrepreneurs had to act beyond their official duties; they dealt with “novel problems,” and therefore had to propose “novel solutions,” mobilizing and combining resources in new ways. According to Fedyukin, Peter wasn’t very good at supplying his educational initiatives with continuous funding (wryly adding that “maybe [Peter] wasn’t unique in that sense”), and he had no pool of qualified teachers from which to appoint personnel. Instead, such tasks fell to administrative entrepreneurs, who invented
new administrative structures and relied on their “informal connections in the administrative domain,” which allowed them to redistribute resources, find buildings, etc. In this context, the state was not an actor in the creation of educational institutions, but rather a structural framework in which administrative entrepreneurs could pursue their projects.

As an example of this process, Fedyukin discussed the 1715 establishment of the Naval Academy in St. Petersburg, the first school of its kind in Russia. Its founder and director was a Frenchman, “the Baron de Saint-Hilaire.” By tracing the records of Saint-Hilaire’s life through various archives, Fedyukin uncovered the fascinating story of an ambitious con artist. Saint-Hilaire, born “Joseph Hilaire,” was a onetime French merchant who fled to Portugal after being convicted of insurance fraud, became involved in the War of Spanish Succession, and eventually reinvented himself as the “Baron de Saint-Hilaire, a Flemish nobleman.” He arrived in St. Petersburg in 1715 and proposed (among other things) the idea for the project of a naval academy to Peter.

Fedyukin stresses that he is not suggesting that Peter was indifferent to learning—however, “in no sense did Peter actually set up and establish a school.” Rather, the Academy was set up by Saint-Hilaire, who “found a way to exploit Peter’s general interest in learning and get a job for himself with a very nice salary.” According to Fedyukin, almost all of the educational institutions founded in 17th-century Russia follow a similar model—they were initiated by specific individuals asking the tsar for permission to teach, for resources, and for patronage.

Fedyukin sees interesting parallels between these Petrine-era “administrative entrepreneurs” and the process that occurred after the collapse of the Soviet Union. He concluded by describing his narrative as “a conscious attempt to create an alternative, liberal narrative of the history of education in Russia… driven not by the modernizing state, but by individual actors and entrepreneurs.”

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