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Lubny Gymnasium as a center of knowledge, self-awareness and protest in the conditions of the Russian imperial system

Abstract. This paper explores the multifaceted role of the Lubny Men's Gymnasium within the Russian imperial educational system during the second half of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Drawing upon archival documents, periodicals, and memoir literature, the study focuses on the institution as both an instrument of imperial control and a space of cultural resistance. Special attention is paid to everyday practices, disciplinary structures, and manifestations of civic and national self-awareness among students. Through microhistorical analysis, the paper highlights how gymnasium life shaped identities and encouraged compliance and defiance within the broader context of imperial policies.

Keywords: Lubny Gymnasium, Russian Empire, identity, discipline, students, resistance, education.

The Lubny Men's Gymnasium, founded in 1872, exemplifies the contradictory dynamics of educational development under the Russian imperial regime. While formally subordinated to the Ministry of Education, the institution soon became a nucleus of intellectual initiative, cultural resistance, and national consciousness within the Poltava Governorate (Seferovsky, 1898: 12).

The first director, Matvii Symonov, better known as Nomys, was a thnographer and folklorist and a symbolic figure of Ukrainian patriotism. His leadership (1872 – 1877) shaped the ethos of the institution. Symonov's removal and replacement with a stricter imperial administrator marked the beginning of bureaucratic and ideological pressure on the gymnasium.

Despite attempts at russification and strict disciplinary control (Rules for Students, 1874), students and teachers often resisted imposed norms. The gymnasium became an educational laboratory where cultural identity and civic agency could be fostered despite imperial restrictions.

The presence of figures such as Fedir Kaminskyi, who founded a natural history museum and guided students in archaeological research, elevated the intellectual prestige of the school and established it as a center of local heritage preservation (Vantsak, 1988: 36).

The museum featured collections of minerals, fossils, ancient tools, and numismatics, contributing to a growing historical awareness among students. It also drew attention from academic communities across the empire, being exhibited at archaeological congresses in Kyiv. Such projects helped students develop research skills and instilled a deep interest in their native land (Lyaskoronskyi, 1928: 70).

Highly regulated rituals governed everyday life in the gymnasium. Morning bells summoned students for prayer in the recreation hall. The daily schedule included up to five 55-minute lessons, short breaks, and one long recess for meals or physical exercises. Dress codes were strictly enforced: a gray tunic with silver buttons and a badge marked with the initials LG, a dark-blue cap with a cockade, and a leather satchel for books (Koval, 2013: 93).

Behavior was subject to surveillance both inside and outside the school. Students were forbidden from visiting billiard rooms, taverns, and social clubs, and could be reprimanded or even expelled for acts of defiance, including participation in protests or moral improprieties. Teachers kept detailed behavior records in disciplinary logs, and punishments ranged from public scolding to confinement and expulsion (Kievlyanin, 1907: №78).

Nonetheless, resistance took subtle and overt forms. One of the most illustrative examples is the staging of Martyn Borulia in 1906 – an event widely covered in the periodical Hromadska Dumka (Hromadska Dumka, 1906: №40). This theatrical performance, conducted in Ukrainian, was not only a cultural breakthrough but also a politically charged statement against the dominance of the Russian language in public institutions. The enthusiastic response of the local audience and students demonstrated the deep cultural resonance of the Ukrainian language and heritage.

In addition to theatrical expressions, gymnasium students participated in educational excursions organized by teachers like Fedir Kaminskyi. These included trips to archaeological sites, museums, and local industries to instill practical knowledge and historical consciousness. Reports in regional press highlighted the students' interest and the pedagogical value of such outings, which subtly challenged the narrow utilitarian framework imposed by imperial curricula (Kievlyanin, 1906: №187).

The local newspapers also provide valuable insight into students' everyday experiences and struggles. For example, coverage in Rada and other publications mentions poor sanitary conditions in dormitories, dissatisfaction with meals, and limited access to Ukrainian literature – all of which became sources of protest or quiet resistance. Even mundane experiences, such as collective prayers or obligatory attendance at pro-monarchist lectures, were occasionally met with passive disobedience or satirical responses documented by teachers and journalists (Rada, 1914: №31).

These press sources, often overlooked in macrohistorical studies, allow us to reconstruct the microclimate of dissent and the nuanced forms of national identity formation that were emerging within the everyday routine of the gymnasium. The political engagement of students also intensified. Archival sources mention their participation in workers' rallies, anti-monarchist discussions, and the organization of protest petitions. In some cases, students boycotted school food providers suspected of propagating pro-Tsarist views, reflecting a wider social consciousness (Shandra, 1985: 23).

The presence of an internal church and daily religious instruction underscores the clerical-imperial alliance in shaping loyalty and values. However, even within this structure, figures like Father Mykola Kopa-Ovdienko are remembered for their duality: simultaneously strict and forgiving, and at times, openly eccentric and resistant to dogmatic imposition (Timofeev, 2016: 240).

The coexistence of obedience and opposition within the gymnasium environment highlights its function as a contested space, both an instrument of imperial assimilation and a cradle of Ukrainian civic awakening. Student attire, architecture, rituals, and extracurricular activities reflected this duality. Gymnasiums like the one in Lubny provided the groundwork for forming a modern Ukrainian intelligentsia.

The case of the Lubny Gymnasium clearly illustrates the ambivalent role of imperial educational institutions. While intended to discipline and assimilate youth into the structures of the Russian Empire, gymnasiums often became unexpected incubators of critical thinking, cultural awareness, and national identity. The interplay of obedience and protest within the regulated space

of the classroom and dormitory sheds light on the complexities of identity formation under imperial rule.

This duality was evident in the Lubny Gymnasium: student protests, cultural performances in Ukrainian, and scientific initiatives all emerged alongside strict surveillance and disciplinary enforcement. Such contradictions affirm the value of microhistorical approaches to studying imperial peripheries, where local educational spaces functioned as arenas of both subjugation and emancipation. The Lubny example contributes to broader understandings of how national consciousness took shape within – and sometimes against – the frameworks designed to suppress it.

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