

# Urban middle strata in post-reform Russia: status and social position in the assessments of German historians of the 1970 and 1990

Estratos medios urbanos en la Rusia posterior a la reforma: estatus y posición social en las evaluaciones de los historiadores alemanes de los años 1970 y 1990

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## ABSTRACT

Of the goal of this study is to investigate the position of the urban middle strata in the Russian Empire of the post-reform era. At the same time, the attempts were made to determine the composition of this population category, to correlate its status with traditional philistinism, to reveal the process of capitalist transformation of the latter in the second half of the nineteenth century. Recognizing the transformation of philistinism in the structures of the emerging bourgeois society since the 1860-ies with the influence of government policy, German researchers, especially M. Hildermayer, who paid the most attention to the problem, also point to the complexity, the unevenness of this process, as well as to a certain inconsistency of the imperial power in its assistance. At the same time K. Gestwa's research testifies a certain stability of traditional middle layers that are not always imbued with a specifically bourgeois worldview.

**Keywords:** Russia, urban middle strata, German historiography, philistinism, urbanization, modernization.

## RESUMEN

El objetivo de este estudio es investigar la posición de los estratos medios urbanos en el Imperio ruso de la era posterior a la reforma. Al mismo tiempo, se hicieron intentos para determinar la composición de esta categoría de población, para correlacionar su estatus con el filisteísmo tradicional, para revelar el proceso de transformación capitalista de este último en la segunda mitad del siglo XIX. Reconociendo la transformación del filisteísmo en las estructuras de la emergente sociedad burguesa desde 1860 con la influencia de la política gubernamental, los investigadores alemanes, especialmente M. Hildermayer, que prestaron la mayor atención al problema, también señalan la complejidad, la desigualdad de este proceso, así como a una cierta inconsistencia del poder imperial en su asistencia. Al mismo tiempo, la investigación de K. Gestwa atestigua una cierta estabilidad de las capas medias tradicionales que no siempre están imbuidas de una visión del mundo específicamente burguesa.

**Palabras clave:** Rusia, estratos medios urbanos, historiografía alemana, filisteísmo, urbanización, modernización.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Introduction to the problem

In the context of pre-revolutionary Russia social development study, the problem of the urban stratum position in the conditions of accelerated modernization occupies a prominent place. However, at the same time, the very concept of the “middle class” is disputed; Its composition is also heterogeneous, especially in transitional type societies. During the determination of the urban middle stratum composition, we have adopted the scheme proposed by V.V. Kanishchev as the basis. Among the middle urban strata, he singled out small owners, urban employees and intellectuals, small property owners, hired workers of private handicraft, trade and railway enterprises, domestic servants and laborers who owned their own houses and household plots. The assignment of servants and laborers to the middle urban strata is more than controversial; V.V. Kanishchev speaks of them as semi-proletarians, and those who are employed in the production system, are usually regarded as the part of the proletariat except artisans and craftsmen (Kanishchev, 1998). At the same time, the “working aristocracy” is not taken into account here. Taking into account the mentioned reservations, it seems possible to proceed from this understanding of the average urban strata. At that, an essential feature of bourgeois society middle class is the presence of a rather numerous and authoritative number of small entrepreneurs in it as the nucleus (Sklyarov, 1993) - in the first place, they fall under the definition of “burgherism”. Their position in post-reform Russia was addressed both by domestic and foreign historians, including Germanic experts in Russia, especially in the last decades of the twentieth century. Within the framework of this article, it is intended to analyze the interpretation of such problem aspects by the latter as the composition of the middle urban strata in post-reform Russia, their legal status and the problem of their “traditional” part integration into the emerging bourgeois society. In the context of this article, the treatment of the urban intelligentsia position in post-reform Russia is not considered by the German experts of Russia - our work considers only the categories attributed by the German historian S. Merl to the “economically independent part” of the middle urban stratum.

### 1.2 Problem relevance

The importance of “middle class” formation and development history study in various countries, incl. the Russia before the revolution, does not raise any doubts, given the fact that the “middle class” of bourgeois society is the mass base of the bourgeois-democratic political system. It is indisputable that the study of foreign historiography of the problem, incl. the Russia of the post-reform decades, when a certain transformation of the philistine class into bourgeois groups began together with capitalist transformation, will contribute to a better representation of this transformation problem and its progress in the conditions of the modernizing country. Taking into account an extreme variety of literature on the social history of Russia in the second half of the nineteenth century, a regional country specific approach to the study of historiography is appropriate. The subject of this article is the German historiography of the topic.

### 1.3. Problem study

The historiography of Russian urbanization history, incl. the position of the urban middle layers in the post-reform era, is extremely extensive, and the issue of a concept definition was actively discussed in the literature (Mironov, 1999; Strekalova, 2003), however, the analysis of the problem coverage in foreign Russian studies has not become the subject of special research yet. V.V. Kanishchev in his thesis devoted to the urban middle strata of Central Russia during the period of 1917-1920, touched upon the issues of Russian urban middle strata history general coverage in western urbanistics. He pointed to the uncertainty and vagueness of notions “middle urban layers” and “middle class” in foreign Russian studies. At the same time, V.V. Kanishchev noted the demonstration “of various pluralistic methodological approach possibilities to the study of our history” by Western studies of Russia Potkina paid a particular attention to the interpretation of the situation in the Russian artisan industry by the English-language literature. Some people engaged in this industry belonged to the middle urban strata. (Potkina, 1994). A.V. Karagodin performed the analysis of migrant peasant role by the English studies of Russia concerning the increase of the urban population number in Russia, the replenishing of its various categories (Karagodin, 2000). One of the authors of the proposed article (Dorozhkin, 2007.) regarded the problem of the urban middle class place in the process of pre-revolutionary Russia urbanization in the aspect of its study by German experts of Russia. But until now, the analysis of the situation for these population strata of post-reform Russia has not been performed by German historians of the last decades of the 20th century as an independent study subject. This circumstance determined the choice of the article topic.

### 1.4 Hypotheses

The study of the middle urban stratum situation coverage in post-reform Russia by German historiography will provide an opportunity to visualize better the social processes in a Russian city under capitalist transformation, to reveal the concepts that exist in this regard in historical science.

## 2. Methods

The problem of the middle urban strata situation and development in post-reform Russia is examined in the context of “social history”, which has been also widespread in German-speaking Russian studies during recent decades. As they mentioned the very historiography of the problem is analyzed in accordance with the country specific approach.

When the German historiography consider the problem of the middle urban strata position in post-reform Russia, the authors apply the scientific principles of historicism, objectivity, comprehensiveness and systemic character. The work is based on the following general scientific and general historical methods: ideographic, expressed in the description of individual historian approaches and concepts; the method of periodization, according to which the study of historiography is carried out within a specific period, systemic, historical-comparative and historical-genetic methods.

## 3. Main part

Until the late 1970-ies the Germanic studies of Russia paid relatively little attention to the population category known as the “middle class”. S. Merle, the only German researcher of Russia, attempted to determine the composition of the “urban middle strata” at the end of the 20th century. S. Merle included (in 1914) approximately 1 million subjects of the empire who had higher and completed secondary education and who were employed in the public service, at private sector enterprises, and in the system of city and zemstvo self-government. The representatives of this category formed an economically non-independent part of the middle layer. S. Merle included merchants (small and medium ones), artisans, and small industrialists to its economically independent part. It was not as numerous as in Western Europe and its material security left much to be desired (Merle, 1998; Rakhmatulloeva, (2016).

For the German-speaking historiography, the thesis of burgher absence in the Russian Empire as an independent social stratum, including the period of modernization, is a classic one. This was stressed by M. Weber and O. Hatch at the beginning of the twentieth century. In the post-war period, the researcher K.H. Ruffman saw here one of the indicators of Russia backwardness - Germanic studies of Russia studies considered this factor a very important one (Ruffmann, 1966; Dorozhkin et al, 2018). However, neither K.-H.Ruffman nor other German historians (except of M. Hildermeier and partly H. Haumann) did not specifically analyze the structure of the urban population of Russia and did not address the issue of its traditional stratum mentality (Haumann, 1980). They did not consider the issue of this mentality compatibility with the bourgeois value system. The main emphasis was on the small number of philistine class, its heterogeneity and erosion. The issue of a part of this class reorganization was specially considered by M. Hildermeier. Touching upon the issue of the middle urban stratum composition, this researcher noted their great heterogeneity in comparison with the nobility and the peasantry. The philistines themselves were far from homogeneous and included individuals of various social and professional status - from homeowners and the owners of craft workshops to the poorest petty traders. But M. Hildermeier did not confine himself to a formal legal approach and did not identify the “middle class” with the philistine class. The researcher noted rightly that on the one hand, the estate was diluted, and there was the tendency to form a new “middle class” in the era of capitalist industrialization, on the other. M. Hildermeier included engineers, doctors, teachers, lawyers, the employees of various institutions and enterprises to this stratum. The researcher pointed out the unresolved issue concerning the criteria of urban middle stratum determination (Hildermeier, 1977; Ivanov, 1971). But in subsequent studies by M. Hildermeier philistine class became the focus of his attention.

At the very end of the twentieth century. G. Altrichter raised the issue of philistinism composition. Recalling that his representatives in St. Petersburg formed the second largest class (after the peasants) of the population, H. Altrichter referred to this category artisans, the keepers of small shops, street vendors; commoners and seasonal workers and domestic servants. Recognizing, therefore, an extreme heterogeneity of the stratum, which prevents the formation of corporate identity among its representatives (Altrichter, 1997), H. Altrichter, however, did not relate the concepts of “philistinism” and “middle class”. The latter category is absent in his work. The researcher did not take into account the fact that not only philistines, but also the representatives of other classes could perform and act as small traders, artisans and the people of other occupations. Speaking about the peasants who moved to the city, G. Altrichter paid the main attention to those engaged in the industrial production system - the diversity of such migrant employment was not taken into account fully. They also did not touch upon the issue of philistinism differentiation. Earlier M. Hildermeier, analyzing the works by A.G. Rashin and A.S. Nifontov, pointed out an extremely general nature of this class problem polarization interpretation by Soviet literature. The isolation of the proletarian layer from his environment, on the one hand, and the “burghers-owners”, on the other hand, took place indeed, but the intensity of the process was different. Besides, local peculiarities should be taken into account. The results of a thorough study by L.M. Ivanov testify to the stable situation of small owners at the turn of the 19 - 20 centuries in a number of regions and their predominance in many, mainly administrative and

trade cities of Russia.

A certain stability of the traditional middle stratum position in the Russian Empire is also evidenced by K. Gestwa's fundamental research on the development of small-scale production in the post-reform and pre-revolutionary Russia. Having examined in detail the development of industrial production in rural areas ("proto-industrialization"), using the examples of Ivanovo and Pavlovo Gestwa analyzed the evolution of the first of them into a city-type settlement that merged with the Ascension Posad. The village of Pavlovo, the old center of handicrafts, did not acquire an urban status, however, despite the production of numerous metal products in it. This was the ground for Gestwa to see a longer preservation of the proto-industrial stage of production here; the factual material given by the researcher, however, testifies to the undoubted technical progress of Pavlovo handicrafts (Gestwa, 1999). This case is an example of the difficulty of an official city status obtaining even in a large fishing settlement in the Russian Empire, the evidence that even during the capitalist transformation of Russia, the state power regarded the city as the tool for the territory management in the military-administrative, financial and economic, social and other aspects. On the other hand, it should be said that the residents of large commercial villages showed a significant adherence to the traditional worldview. Thus, even in the 1860-ies, on the eve of the village transformation into the city, the residents of Ivanovo objected the railway launch, believing that it would undermine the export of goods and entail the rise of prices for essential goods. P.G. Ryndziunsky also pointed to the wary attitude of Ivanovo peasants to technical improvements, which could cause the decrease in demand for workers with a subsequent unemployment. This conservatism among the inhabitants of a large center of textile production was explained by P.G. Ryndziunsky by the abundance of artisans and handicraftsmen among them who feared the results of technical reconstruction that were ruining for them. K. Gestwa also showed by the example of the village of Pavlovo that there was no fatal inevitability of the "proto-industrial" artisan production transformation into the factory one. German historian found the Pavlovo version a classic example of handicraft enterprise stability, which fit perfectly into the general context of European small-scale industry development as a typical case. Like the Russian village of crafts, "co-operative capitalism", that was formed in Pavlovo during the period of pre-revolutionary industrialization (or "handicraft alternative" - both terms belong to K. Gestwa), took place in a number of Western European countries. This "handicraft alternative" also meant the relative stability of small independent producer position.

Noting the limited opportunities of burghers of the pre-reform era in terms of significant capital accumulation, M. Hildermeier recognized preservation as the leading tendency to this stratum impoverishment as a whole and in the post-reform period. The smaller part, however, managed to improve its status, having become the owners of small handicraft, city and trade enterprises. On the other hand, the growth of the urban population and cities in the post-reform Russia was accompanied by the transformation of many of them into industrial centers instead of traditional administrative centers. Accordingly, the social structure of cities also changed - in this regard, M. Hildermeier recognized the significant proletarianization of the traditional middle stratum part in the industrial regions of the country. But at the same time there was a numerical growth of the philistine class - both in absolute and in relative terms (until the end of the 19th century). Then, due to the growing influx of people from the village to the city, the proportion of middle-class among the urban residents began to fall. This was found, first of all, in capitals and large industrial centers, while the share of the traditional middle layer remained stable in towns. The occupation of the petty bourgeois was more stable (Hildermeier, 1979; Hildermeier M., 1986). In the fall of the share of small proprietors M. Hildermeier, like Soviet researchers, saw the indicator of the far-reaching process of social differentiation in industrial cities in Russia. Without denying this, it should be said, however, that the reduction of the small urban proprietor circle - the potential bearers of the bourgeois worldview - hardly had an unambiguously positive impact on the capitalist evolution of the country. M. Hildermeier did not stop, however, on the specifics of the social side of this evolution in Russian conditions and on the peculiarities of the situation of traditional trade and craft layers in the context of "catching up industrialization". Instead, the researcher limited himself to a general indication that urbanization in Russia, not inferior to that in a foreign Europe by intensity, was not identical to it (Hildermeier, 1986; Lobão, & Pereira, (2016).

In his later work, M. Hildermeier specifically traced the influence of reforms in 1860-ies on philistinism social status position. Their impact on the estate appears a dual one to the researcher - after the abolition of serfdom, a certain leveling of townspeople and peasant status occurred. The former lost an important advantage over the second one after the tax reform - the right to enter the merchant class without legal difficulties. The elements of the estate were not eliminated in taxation. On the other hand, the reform of the tax system in 1863-1865 meant the differentiation of small and medium-sized owner corporation into the groups that differed in income and occupation. Thus, according to the researcher, the transformation of philistinism began into the structures of the early industrial city society. Some townspeople were separated from agricultural activities and differentiation of the urban population increased. At the same time, they remained class barriers to the replenishment of philistinism by the people from other social groups, primarily from the peasants. In many respects this was the consequence of the autocracy course to preserve and strengthen the community in the post-reform period (Hildermeier, 1985;

Mailybaev et al, 2018). In relation to “burgherism” the policy was also inconsistent. Replacing the per capita tax for residents with the tax on real estate, the government, however, did not dare to abolish the guild system. (Hildermeier, 1986; Emam, & Shajari, (2013). M. Hildermeier refrains from unambiguous conclusions about the depth of changes for the bulk of the urban population after the reforms of the 1860-ies; the material he provides indicates indirectly that the reforms affected this part of the townspeople significantly less than the merchant class. The conclusion of the researcher on the modest place of “burgherism” as an object of government policy is generally justified, even though it was not forgotten by government.

#### 4. Conclusions

Summing up, it should be said that until the end of the 1970 German (with reference to that epoch - exclusively West German) studies of Russia were relatively little interested in the position of the urban middle strata in both the post-reform and pre-revolutionary Russia. The very definition of the middle urban strata (with the reference to Russia in the second half of the 19th - the beginning of the XXth century) was absent in the writings of German historians until the end of the century - only S. Merle attempted to define this concept and determine the composition of the corresponding population category broader. Until the mid-1980 German researchers usually considered the position of the urban middle strata in post-reform Russia in the general context of the country modernization, then the works by M. Hildermeyer appear directly dedicated to the Russian philistinism of the second half of the nineteenth century and its social transformation. During the 1990 there remains a certain interest to the middle strata of the population of the country in German “Rossica”; At the same time, there is an increasing attention to the extra-urban (partly to the urban) part of the Russian traditional “middle class”, which is clearly demonstrated by K.Gestwa’s fundamental monographic study.

#### Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that the presented data do not contain a conflict of interest.

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