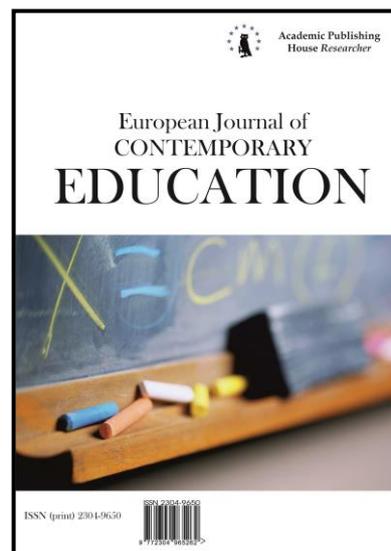




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## The History of Education

### The System of Teaching Literacy in Company Schools of the Russian Army: the 1850–1860s Experience

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#### Abstract

The paper addresses the introduction of literacy schools for the lower ranks in the Russian army. The study primarily focuses on the teaching process, as well as on the used instructional techniques aimed to improve the education efficiency.

The materials include army orders, as well as publications by Russian officers in the Russian Empire's central military edition – the Voennyi Sbornik (“Military Collection”) journal.

The methodological basis for the study is formed by principles of historicism and objectivity, traditional for this kind of research. It also employed analytical, probabilistic, statistical, typological and comparative methods. The method of historicism allowed for the use of diverse facts, uncovered in field work with sources, and subsequent identification of important phenomena and processes related to the organization of the teaching process in company schools. The paper also paid attention to the instructional techniques that were applied in the teaching process.

In conclusion, the authors note that the company literacy schools established in 1857 boosted the number of literate lower ranks. Classes in company schools were carried out in periods when military units were stationed in winter quarters. The term of study was no more than 3 years in these schools. The curriculum included a limited range of subjects such as reading, writing,

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arithmetic and Scripture knowledge. The teaching was performed by regimental officers who were given complete freedom in choosing methods to instruct learners.

**Keywords:** Russian army, 1850–1860s, company schools, study guides, books, literacy.

### **1. Introduction**

At the end of 1857, the regiments of the Russian army saw the introduction of company schools designed to teach literacy for lower ranks. The teaching of the lower ranks first began in the guards divisions, and the successful experience gained was then extended to the army, the navy and non-regular units. In this paper, we would like to have a closer look at the experience that was accumulated in the teaching of the lower ranks in company schools.

### **2. Materials and methods**

The materials include army orders, as well as publications by Russian officers in the Russian Empire's central military edition – the *Voenny Sbornik* ("Military Collection") journal.

The methodological basis for the study is formed by principles of historicism and objectivity, traditional for this kind of research. It also employed analytical, probabilistic, statistical, typological and comparative methods. The method of historicism allowed for the use of diverse facts, uncovered in field work with sources, and subsequent identification of important phenomena and processes related to the organization of the teaching process in company schools. The paper also paid attention to the instructional techniques that were applied in the teaching process.

### **3. Discussion**

In the late 1850s – early 1860s, the Russian military press repeatedly discussed questions of enhancing literacy in the Russian army. For example, in 1858, the year that the *Voenny Sbornik* journal was created, it published an article "On the benefits of teaching literacy for the entire mass of Russian troops" (*O pol'ze obucheniya gramote vsei massy russkikh voisk*) ([O pol'ze, 1858](#)). This article topped a general interest to this topic in the next four years. It is known that *Voenny Sbornik* was monthly issued from 1858 to 1917. For example, already in the following year, in 1859, an article appeared "A few more words about the article: "On the benefits of teaching literacy for the entire mass of Russian troop," published in the 2nd issue of *Voenny Sbornik* in 1858" (*Eshche neskol'ko slov po povodu stat'i: O pol'ze obucheniya gramote vsei massy russkikh voisk*) ([N.N., 1859](#)). The same 5th issue of the journal published an article on the primary teaching Cossacks of literacy, written by A. Chebotarev ([Chebotarev, 1859](#)). The 6th issue of the journal brought up an important topic of regimental libraries. For example, N. Abel'dyaev reviewed the process of arranging regimental libraries in the active Caucasus army ([Abel'dyaev, 1859](#)). Importantly, many representatives of the Russian officer corps in the time stressed that corporal punishments practiced in the Russian army were ineffective, and it was necessary to replace them with universal literacy among the lower ranks ([Klugen, 1859](#)).

In addition, much attention was paid to the quality of training of the officers in the Russian officer corps ([V.-skii, 1859](#)). In 1860, an author, under a pseudonym V-Ch-ii, published an article on literacy in the army, where he outlined the experience of teaching reading and writing to the lower ranks ([V-Ch-ii, 1860](#)).

At the same time, the journal published materials on how to launch the teaching process in company schools ([A.M., 1859](#); [Ob ustroistve, 1858](#)).

In 1861, the journal published a list of books in the Bibliography section, specifically designed to teach reading to the lower ranks ([Bibliografiya, 1861](#)). In 1862, an article by an anonymous author, titled "Schools and teaching teams in the army" (*Shkoly i uchebnye komandy v armii*), was published in the journal. The author focused on the extracurricular education of cadets and volunteers (*volnoopredelyayushchiesya*) in the army corps ([Shkoly, 1862](#)). In the same 1862, *Voenny Sbornik* published the article "On literacy in the army" (*O gramotnosti v armii*), which the author signed as *Ne-voennyi* (Non-military). In this article, the author raised the issues of teaching practices in army regimental troops that were stationed in winter quarters, i.e., at the time when they were supposed to take up literacy studies ([Ne-voennyi, 1862](#)).

#### **4. Results**

Following the end of the Crimean War in 1857, the command of the Russian army initiated the creation of company schools in regiments to teaching literacy, namely reading, writing and arithmetic, to the lower ranks (V-Ch-ii, 1860: 310). The responsibility of managing the schools was given to officers. To help them, the army allocated one literate non-commissioned officer or a private soldier for every 10 students. A company school should have 20 lower ranks enrolled from semi-literate privates, predominantly from candidates for non-commissioned grades. The period of studies was not determined by specific time, but was no more than three years. All those who failed to demonstrate good performance, that is, those who were not fit for graduation from school were expelled as incapable of learning to read and write (V-Ch-ii, 1860: 310; Natolochnaya et al., 2018: 226).

Classes in company schools were carried out from October to April, when the troops were stationed in winter quarters. Every year in April, two examinations were arranged for those who were to complete their studies in company schools. The first examination board included a battalion commander, a company commander and an officer who was in charge of the school. The secondary examination was administered by officers during musters by division and corps commanders. The second exam was mainly organized to check and assess the proficiency level of officers who ran the schools. The first examination had the greatest meaning to the lower ranks because they were assigned evaluation points at it. As the maximum score was 4, and no grades were awarded below one, all those who passed the exam were divided into four categories (V-Ch-ii, 1860: 310).

Points were awarded for each individual subject, namely: for reading, penmanship, dictation, arithmetic, abacus calculation and Scripture knowledge. The students were considered to finish a company school when they received an average of 3 full points (V-Ch-ii, 1860: 310-311). The teaching process often applied the Lancaster method which instructed to pronounce letters and write them simultaneously. This method required only a wooden board and a piece of chalk.

For beginners' course in reading, a large cardboard alphabet was recommended, and a cheap way to write was offered by using chopsticks on sand spread in a thin layer in wooden frames or simply on a table (V-Ch-ii, 1860: 311).

To buy the required writing implements, it was allowed to spend one ruble per month for each company school, and also subscribe for a soldier's journal for this money, which was quite comprehensible to the lower ranks. It is noteworthy that as early as in 1847, a volition of Emperor Nicholas I started the journal "Reading for the soldier" (Chteniye dlya soldata) in Russia. On March 3, 1859, Order No. 41 gave the troops of the Caucasian army a strong recommendation to subscribe for this journal to provide moral education to the lower ranks (Izvlechenie, 1859: 159). It means that the recommended subscription for this edition was valid for troops stationed in the interior Russian regions, as well as for army troops deployed in the combat zone.

To encourage literate lower ranks, it was ordered to promote them to non-commissioned officers and corporals mostly before their illiterate comrades-in-arms.

Teaching literacy in schools was required to be taken to the level at which each of the students could fluently write from dictation and read. It was allowed to have bad but legible handwriting. In addition, the student was to know the first four mathematical operations with numbers using the abacus for calculations. Arithmetic, however, was taught only after the student had achieved a good command of writing and reading techniques. Nevertheless, the company school curriculum included training the skills in executing official documents that the lower ranks might need to submit from time to time. For example, it was required in case of any temporary duty, e.g. to redeploy a squad, accept a food supply, property, etc. (V-Ch-ii, 1860: 311)

In addition, teaching reading and writing to soldiers was carried out by different officers as funds and time permitted, regardless of company schools (V-Ch-ii, 1860: 312). Similar training was arranged for the Cossacks. When analyzing the experience of teaching the Cossacks of the Ural Cossack Host, it is important to remember that literacy levels were quite high in some cities, for example, in Uralsk with 14 % of the population (Chebotarev, 1859: 95). The Cossacks here were also taught in winter. The studies typically began in the middle of November and ended in the middle of February. In this period, the Cossacks were efficiently trained in writing from dictation, reading, abacus counting and multiplying.

At the level of battalions in the Russian divisions, teaching literacy was assigned to battalion adjutants (N.N., 1859: 89). In the late 1850s, it was founded out that about 10% of Russian soldiers were able to write and read, and they had the duty to teach others. As a motivation, it was explained to the lower ranks that a literate serviceman got priority in moving higher up the career ladder, and in case of the resignation, a literate soldier had a chance to become a clerk in the village (N.N., 1859: 90).

Now let us proceed with a description of the training system. Company schools were recommended to use the works by Zolotov As a methodological material, namely the author's brochure detailing the instruction method, a brochure on introducing into the reading technique, developed by the author for appanage (udelnye) agricultural schools, and a brochure with tables for Zolotov's methodological materials. However, it should be noted that officers could choose not to follow these instruction materials, but make use of the methodology that they believed to be more efficient (V-Ch-ii, 1860: 312).

We would like to provide an overview of various methods of teaching reading.

The Lancaster method, despite its seemingly simple and cheap application opportunities, was adopted in few company schools, because teaching with this method proved to be much more difficult and time-consuming in practice than teaching by the standard synthetic method. The latter implied starting with the alphabet from a textbook or table, then proceeding to syllables and finally to reading. At the same time, a writing course was separated from reading, as it was difficult for a soldier to memorize simultaneously the forms of printed and cursive letters. Writing lessons began already at the time when soldiers learned the alphabet, syllables and moved to reading phrases. In many company schools of the Russian army, soldiers were taught writing using a slate and a grapholite or diluted chalk and a black wooden board, rather than using chopsticks on the sand. As a result, soldiers perfectly mastered the alphabet with samples of writing in two or three classes (V-Ch-ii, 1860: 312).

The Zolotov method was not often implemented in the army, and this was caused by different conditions in which students were placed in company schools. The common point of the two teaching methods was that students, with rare exceptions, were released from all service duties. Classes took place three times a week, were carried out simultaneously for the whole school and by the same officer – the head of the school. It meant that students were on an equal footing. However, the difference lied in the fact that the Zolotov method was supposed to teach people who were completely illiterate, while company schools often accepted self-taught students with some knowledge of the alphabet. Hence, company school officers had to re-teach self-taught soldiers, instead of teaching them from the very basics. Army officers noted that it was much more challenging to re-teach soldiers than to learn from the very beginning (V-Ch-ii, 1860: 313).

As a result, company schools had the lower ranks that needed to be re-taught and those few that needed initial training. In this connection, it was not expedient to introduce the Zolotov method, since there was only one teacher per 20 students. Therefore, teaching was built for all on equal grounds, but to instruct beginners, schools often engaged non-commissioned officers, who, of course, had no idea of the Zolotov method. Thus, the experience of the first years of company schools in regiments demonstrated that the use of the synthetic method had a greater effect than the Zolotov method. This explained why the heads of company schools proposed to improve the synthetic method, and general debates on this issue ensued on the pages of *Voenny Sbornik*. For example, the article "On the organization of schools in the army" (*Ob ustroistve shkol v voiskakh*) made an attempt to improve the synthetic method of teaching reading and to this end advised to first learn vowels, explain the difference between vowels and consonants, and when naming consonants, always follow one ending, for example, [e], to facilitate memorization for students (*Ob ustroistve, 1858*).

The author of the article "Something on literacy in the army" (*Koe chto o gramotnosti v voiskakh*) indicated that it was difficult to introduce a new pronunciation of letters, since both the soldiers, who had already learned the alphabet, and the teaching soldiers learned based on the old method of letter pronunciation, and it was much more difficult to be re-learned than to learn something anew (*A.M., 1859*).

However, we cannot say that the Zolotov materials were not employed by company schools. His tables proved to be highly efficient. For example, when students learnt syllables in company schools, the Zolotov tables were very helpful. With these tables, it was in fact possible to teach

soldiers to read by syllables in just several lessons. By studying all kinds of syllables, both direct and reverse ones, using cardboard letters, putting various consonants to vowels alternately, the officer accompanied this operations by reading the tables of words made of the already learned syllables (V-Ch-ii, 1860: 315-316).

Speaking of Zolotov's books for beginners, published for appanage agricultural schools, they fully met their objectives. However, there were very few of them (only 2 per school), and schools heads offered to provide all students with this manual.

Classes in company schools were held three times a week, before and after lunch, and twice a week after lunch. Before lunch, classes were given from 8 to 11 am, and after lunch – 2 hours, from 3 to 5 pm. The rest of the time was devoted to the war service training, such as weapon handling, shooting theory and other (V-Ch-ii, 1860: 316). The choice of such a schedule for literacy lessons was explained by the fact that winter afternoon hours were very short and inadequate to achieve any satisfactory results in teaching soldiers to read and write.

On a reading lesson, the lower ranks were given various books, and soldiers began to read aloud. Officers believed that this was the only way to monitor the learning process during the course. However, this type of monitoring over the reading soldiers by the officer was only cursory, because the officer could not control more than 5-6 soldiers at a time. It turned out that on average, each officer could give a soldier only 11.5 hours per year. This was the reason why students with less prominent faculties were expelled from company schools three years later (V-Ch-ii, 1860: 317).

Another serious issue was that soldiers had different books on reading lessons. If everyone was given the same text, everyone could read the same thing, as it was practiced in educational institutions. This way one would read, and others would only follow his reading in their books; while the teacher would only correct and explain mistakes to one student, and the rest class would absorb these explanations. This method could further contribute to students' progress if not the officer himself provided explanations, but asked more capable students to do it, and, by correcting or prompting them to think, he would be able to convey the explanation of the subject to the soldiers themselves (V-Ch-ii, 1860: 318).

There were situations when officers gave home assignments on reading to each student, but soldiers had to learn the same lesson for a few days, because the officer had no opportunity to interview everyone in one lesson. In addition, a practice was in place when officers read the best articles from journals such as "Reading for soldiers" (Chteniye dlya soldata) and "Narodnoye chteniye" (People's reading).

The writing course began only when soldiers could fluently read. At writing classes, officers first used diluted chalk on a black board, while showing how to hold the pen and explaining basic calligraphic rules. When students developed proficiency in the rules of writing strokes and circles, they proceeded to the lowercase and uppercase alphabet, and then the soldiers, who showed good performance, were given copybooks. This was again followed by the training in strokes. It was necessary for learners to get used to writing on paper. Before they began to write from dictation, soldiers were given home assignments – copy texts from books. On lessons, the teacher asked every student to read his home text and corrected some major grammatical errors that learners were required to know of.

After learners mastered the writing technique, officers proceeded to dictations first by separate words, and then by whole phrases.

Teaching arithmetic stood out for numerous methods used. Some schools adopted a more practical approach to arithmetic by only making students learn the names of the numbers that were included in the first four mathematical operations. Other schools did not do it, but only explained to soldiers how to perform the operations, and required a learner to do the operation itself without any explanations. There were cases when officers combined theory and practice and continued to teach in this way until a soldier was able to explain what the material. To accelerate the learning process, officers required that learners learn by heart the rules from books and notes given by officers to soldiers. A similar variety of methods was peculiar to teaching numbers. There were officers who required memorizing single figures, tens, hundreds, thousands, etc.; other officers, seeing how hard it was for soldiers to cope with numbers, limited the task to a million or a hundred thousand. There were also officers who used the methodology published in the article "On how a company commander taught numbers intricacies to his company" (O tom, kak rotnyy komandir uchil svoyu rotu tsifirnoy mudrosti) in "Reading for soldiers" (Chteniye dlya soldata) in 1859.

However, teaching also used an alternative method. For example, all students were divided into four groups, according to the level of the learning material completed. The officer focused on the first and last groups alternately, while the two medium groups were assigned to a non-commissioned officer or to students who knew the first four operations well. The officer often checked the instructors and guided them in rule explanations. With this teaching method, the entire learning process took place in the classroom, no books and notes were handed out, except for practical exercises for those who had already understood all four rules. To check whether a soldier did a sum himself, the teaching officer made him describe how he started to solve the problem and why he did it this way rather than otherwise. At the same time, the officer explained what should have been done if the problem was solved incorrectly (V-Ch-ii, 1860: 320).

The Scripture knowledge was one of the easiest subjects for teaching in company schools. Because succeeding in the subject only required the knowledge of key prayers and the Ten Commandments. As a result, officers only had to explain their meaning. If officers had some time left, they taught the scripture history to soldiers and elaborated on the main duties of a Christian. It is important to note that soldiers liked this subject very much, and the first book that a soldier bought for his extra money was a prayer book.

The experience of teaching soldiers in company schools showed that literacy came most easily to young soldiers, while senior conscripts had to struggle very much to complete the course. It is also important that soldiers preferred solving arithmetic problems to reading books (N.N., 1859: 92). From our viewpoint, this was explained by the applied value of arithmetic that could be used both to calculate a salary, count property items, and later in civil life.

As for the leisure time arrangement, a major role was given to regimental libraries the Russian army. The significance of regimental libraries dramatically grew if the troops were deployed in remote garrisons at outposts in the combat zone, for example, in the period of the Caucasian War. In this environment, books were the primary leisure activity – a relaxation from service – for officers. However, the catalogs of regimental libraries included very few military books, and a vital part was played by Russian literary periodicals, history books and 2-3 books on mathematics. All other books were novels and technical literature for subject-matter specialists. In other words, there was the problem of library collections created at random (Abel'dyaev, 1859: 420).

Speaking of the books for soldiers, they were divided into three categories: religious books referred to the first one, the second one included textbooks, and the third one included books intended for didactic reading (Bibliografiya, 1861: 219).

The first category had the recommended “Fundamentals of Christian teaching” (Nachatki khristianskogo ucheniya) and “Biblical history in short legends, borrowed from the sacred books of the Old and New Testaments” (Bibleyskaya istoriya v kratkikh skazaniyakh, zaimstvovannykh iz svyashchennykh knig vetkhogo i novogo zavetov). The second category allowed to use “Russian Alphabet” (Russkaya Azbuka) by V. Zolotov and “Russian Alphabet for the masses of people” (Russkaya Azbuka dlya narodnykh mass) published by Lermantov and Co. Finally, the third category included a magazine for the lower ranks “Soldiers’ talk” (Soldatskaya beseda) and “Zolotov’s talks in the training fencing class” (Besedy Zolotova v uchebnom fekhtoval'nom klasse) (Bibliografiya, 1861: 219).

## **5. Conclusion**

Thus, the company literacy schools established in 1857 boosted the number of literate lower ranks. Classes in company schools were carried out in periods when military units were stationed in winter quarters. The term of study was no more than 3 years in these schools. The studies included such subjects as reading, writing, arithmetic and Scripture knowledge. The teaching was performed by regimental officers who were given complete freedom in choosing the methods to instruct students.

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