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## Essays in Middle and High School in Russia: Historical Background

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Differences between the essay writing methodology of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have allowed us to perceive the turn of the nineteenth–twentieth centuries as a time of flourishing sophistication in school essays. The substantial humanitarian component of the school essays of that period mirrors current approaches to formulating essay topics for the school final exam. As this chapter shows, modern essay writing methodology in Russia can be seen not as a recent invention but as a return to elements of the methodology existing at the turn of the nineteenth–twentieth centuries. We can learn from similar processes that took place in the development of writing pedagogy in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, where the teaching of writing lost its special philological character. This chapter analyzes the scholarly literature on essay methodology from this period and identifies three key directions of its development: 1) an active scientific and pedagogical search related to the regulation of the school composition form and requirements for this genre of writing; 2) the expansion of journalistic topics in school essays on literature, which included multidisciplinary (non-literary) topics; and 3) the functioning of the final essay as the main form of checking the general humanitarian knowledge of the high school graduate and as a method of admission to universities without exams.

Examining the history of school essays in Russia, it has become clear that the modern Russian methodology for teaching essay writing is built on three hundred years of domestic experience with the use of essays as a key criterion for the language education of the younger generation (Brenchugina-Romanova, 2000; Chertov, 2013; Getmanskaya, 2015; Reut, 2013). In Russia, the methodology for using essays became systematic at the turn of the nineteenth to twentieth century and was transformed into an exemplary methodological model for secondary schools and universities throughout the next century,

having received one essential addition in the 1920s. This addition was instigated by the social revolution of 1917, which brought about changes to the secondary school curriculum that existed at the turn of the nineteenth to twentieth century. Reforms resulted in the exclusion of then-existing language arts from the school curriculum. It was substituted by two new disciplines in the 1920s—Russian language and literature. As a result of the division, literature education developed into its modern form during the course of the twentieth century and obtained a new dominant element—close analysis of literary (mainly classical) works. Post-reform, the school essay no longer aimed to develop writing based on historical, geographical, and agricultural material and physical law as before. Ethical reflective essays became a thing of the past. At that stage educators rejected the goal of developing writing based on non-literary material and focused mainly on purely literary themes (Getmanskaya, 2013). However, due to that trend, in the twentieth century, school essays started to lose the thematic breadth that was typical of the school essay in the pre-revolutionary period, before the division of language arts into Russian language and literature.

This essay model was only strengthened throughout the twentieth century. Now the situation has changed. Currently, Russian schools have been actively returning to the thematic interdisciplinarity of essays, which has now become part of the unified state exam in Russian (see Chapter 10). The growing importance of general humanitarian themes in essays motivates scholarly interest in the methodology of the early twentieth century, when interdisciplinarity was the norm.

The differences between the essay writing methodology of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries let us perceive the turn of the century as a time of flourishing sophistication in school essays that then disappeared post-reform. The substantial humanitarian component of the school essays of that period is echoed in current approaches to the formulation of essay topics for the final exam in Russian high schools. The return of modern essay writing methodology in the present period to elements of the methodology existing at the turn of the nineteenth to twentieth centuries proves the necessity of studying that period, both its best practices and areas of controversy.

As this chapter will show based on a review of archived instructional manuals and the work of nineteenth century methodologists, teaching writing in the literature classroom before the post-revolutionary reforms was not limited to the content of the discipline “literature.” One of the main pieces of evidence for this was the broad humanitarian themes of school essays even in literature classes. Historical, geographical, moral, and natural-scientific themes were widespread in high schools along with literary themes. The the-

matic breadth confirmed the humanitarian (non-philological) basis of teaching writing in the literature classroom.

The teaching of composition in schools became a priority for many pedagogical researchers during this period and was also included in the content of the state programs and official recommendations of the National Education Ministry. Nevertheless, as I demonstrate here, the introduction of the essay into school practice was accompanied by a number of methodological failures caused by the predominance of reproductive approaches, a significant difference between the practice of writing in school and the official ministerial recommendations, and the mass distribution of poor-quality manuals for training students to write essays.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, a number of works appeared that suggested ways to improve the school essay (Alferov, 1911; Braylovsky, 1910; Filonov, 1902; Golubkov, 1914; Larionov, 1915; Ovsyaniko-Kulikovskii, 1911; Shumilovskii, 1910). Scientists proposed the use of topics that go beyond the subject of literature, approaching writing as a kind of research problem, and a clear correspondence of the essay topics to the psychological and age characteristics of students.

Aleksandr Alferov (1911) and Vasiliy Golubkov (1914) considered the final year of high school studies to be a transitional stage before study at the university and recommended replacing essays written in class with essays written at home, raising the requirements for more advanced students. All the themes of the essays focused on the work of authors from the school curriculum. The main conditions for the success of the essay in the conception of these scholars were: individualization of themes for school composition, advanced work on the plan of the essay, as well as work on the mandatory list of literary criticism.

The final essay played an important role in determining the final knowledge of high school students and the starting level of knowledge for those who enter the university. Its significance was such that students whose essays received excellent marks were given the opportunity to enter the university without exams. The final composition, as well as compositions in earlier classes, checked the student's knowledge of style and only then the literary knowledge of students. The broad humanitarian orientation of the final school essay prepared the high school graduate not so much for the continuation of their philological education but for the execution of multiple tasks related to social and civic communication.

Modern literary education in schools now targets a wide range of knowledge in the humanities and is gradually departing from a focus on philology and literature. We can therefore learn from similar debates that took place in the development of writing pedagogy in the nineteenth and early twentieth

century. As I argue in this chapter, at the turn of the twentieth century, school essay methodology in the Russian tradition was characterized by three key elements:

1. An active scientific and pedagogical search related to the regulation of the school composition form and requirements for this genre of writing;
2. The expansion of journalistic topics in school essays on literature, which included multidisciplinary (non-literary) topics;
3. The functioning of the final essay as the main form of checking the general humanitarian knowledge of the high school graduate and as a method of admission to universities without exams.

Caused mainly by the evolving practice of school essays, these processes, except for the last one, were gradually developing during the second half of the nineteenth century.

## Regulating the School Essay Form and Methodology

The first high school curriculum, “Sample Curriculum of the Russian Language and Church Slavonic and Literature,” was published by the Ministry of Public Education in 1890. It relegated essay writing methodology to the senior classes, where essays were included in a group of exercises in stylistics, working on speech faults and compliance with language norms. The same group (exercises in stylistics) included translations from classical languages (Greek and Latin) into Russian, written reproductions of some content in the Russian and classical languages, written reports on the study of some mandatory literary work, and analysis of the chosen literary work—its content, plan, form, style and idea (Ministry of Public Education, 1890). The methodology of essays was closely connected with translations from Greek and Latin into Russian.

The improvement of the student’s writing directly depended on his or her ability to translate from classical languages. This interdependence between writing skills and translation techniques was supported by the above-mentioned curriculum (Ministry of Public Education, 1890). The program emphasized that the writing and thinking processes of students were imperfect because of their age: “due to the immaturity of students, their thoughts are rather empty, and, therefore, students’ essays can be characterized by stylistic poverty and wide use of stereotypical expressions” (Ministry of Public Education, 1890, p. 104). To teach students how to use the Russian language to its full extent, lecturers also offered them exercises on the translation of abstracts from the ancient Greek and Roman literature into Russian. According to the author of this curriculum, while practicing the exact transfer of classical

texts into the Russian language, students would adopt features of their native language by constantly comparing it with the speech of Ancient Rome and Greece (Ministry of Public Education, 1890).

This recommendation could have led to the idea that the Russian language was subordinate to classical languages. However, a more detailed analysis proves that classical texts were mainly used to improve the learner's scientific and journalistic writing and to model the most important styles for writing essays (Getmanskaya, 2015). The relationship of essay writing to translation indicates that writing was predominantly an exercise in learners expressing themselves in the correct style. It should be noted that the existence of the state program, on the one hand, helped the methodology of school composition to develop, but on the other hand, the abundance of writing instructions minimized its creative component.

Due to the shortcomings of school essays, some scholars rejected this type of exercise. Academician Dmitriy Ovsyaniko-Kulikovskii wrote,

It is time to abandon pseudo-pedagogical thoughts, writing exercises on any given or unspecified topic are beneficial. It is only a school of puzzling scholasticism, sophistry, contrivance and deception; it is a complete waste of time both for students and teachers. (1911, p. 429)

The judgmental position of Ovsyaniko-Kulikovskii was caused not so much by the weakness of practical work with essays but by the mass distribution of manuals that “facilitated” the task for students. Criticizing such manuals, Sergei Brailovskii pointed out a number of the following methodological mistakes:

- The redundancy of theoretical reasoning, while writing essays is a matter of practical skills;
- The abundance of ready-made essay samples that encouraged students to plagiarize.

Instead of developing independent approaches to the analysis of a literary work, the student was offered the results of someone else's work in the finished samples of school compositions (Brailovskii, 1910).

This reproductive approach would have been less negative if the proposed samples had been of the proper level, but the quality of outlines and texts left much to be desired. In my estimation, Alexey Semenov's (1912) book, *Outlines and Essays: The Course for the 7<sup>th</sup> Form of Gymnasiums*, is an example of just such a manual. This two-volume edition contained 116 topics and outlines for essays related to the Russian literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth

centuries. It largely repeats the content of literature textbooks, in particular, Vladimir Savodnik's (1906) textbook on literature entitled *Essays on the History of the Russian Literature of the Nineteenth Century*. If students used this manual, little research would be required of them. In fact, the author offered a rigid algorithm for writing about any given topic. Students could only add "actual proofs" to the proposed scheme of analysis.

The "crisis of the genre" of the essay in high school was associated not only with the predominance of reproductive approaches, but also, in part, with overly regulated official requirements for its content. The curricula developed by the Ministry of Public Education in the 1890s contained recommendations on essay topics in high school, which, on the one hand, created useful methodological mechanisms for writing an essay, and on the other unnecessarily structured students' creative work (Ministry of Public Education, 1890, p. 80). The main recommendations were formulated as follows:

- Essay topics should correspond to the course and age of students;
- Teachers could not take essay topics exclusively from the existing textbooks;
- Teachers of Russian literature were obliged to make up their own essay topics and help students develop outlines;
- Teachers should avoid overly general essay topics embracing several historical epochs or a whole series of literary phenomena;
- Students' essays should be devoted to the literary works of the best Russian writers, "having a positive direction and truly artistic nature capable of contributing to the proper literary education of students."

In my opinion, the differentiation between research-oriented and reproductive approaches to writing essays was important for understanding how students' opinions about the literary material they were studying were introduced into their essays. In this regard, Sergey Larionov's (1915) interpretation of two main approaches to essays is of particular interest. Considering two statements—"the art of writing an essay" (p. 3) and "the drafting of an essay"—Larionov insisted on the latter (p. 3). Outlines of compositions offered by Larionov (1915) using the method "the drafting of an essay" (p. 3) show that they are designed for students who have deep knowledge of literary-historical course content. According to Larionov, essay teaching is not about writing cribs or composing texts based on a certain outline but rather developing a thoughtful and scientific understanding of the chosen topic. Larionov's typology of essays was built on the consistent complexity of literary-theoretical and literary-historical materials. In fact, it is a transitional methodology from school essays to university essays. For starters, this methodology provides

complex features of certain fictional characters (i.e., simple characteristics are the study subject in primary school). Next, students should master characteristics common to a group of characters, comparative characteristics of two or more literary images or phenomena, as well as analyzing several literary works and historical facts regarding the same event (Larionov, 1915).

The outlines compiled by Larionov (1915) for these essays are characterized by their strict composition and scientific nature, but they also give room for students' independent activity. The research approach is demonstrated in an outline for the topic "The Origin and Gradual Development of Realism in Russian Literature" (Larionov, 1915). This plan has a prominent research focus. It helped students who knew the main topics of the course structurally rather than meaningfully, leaving enough room for their self-expression.

Aleksey Lebedev developed a "research-and-technological" approach to essay teaching which is similar to Larionov's (1915) methodology and was represented in his work, "Tasks of School Essays" (Lebedev, 1916). Identifying the concepts of "analysis" and "essay," Lebedev emphasized, "Analysis is a hard task that should be carried out methodically. Analysis or essay are the skills that should be taught" (Lebedev, 1916, p. 276). From Lebedev's viewpoint, any written essay should be preceded by an oral essay composed in the classroom. The scholar defined a school essay as a complex product that students must master by the end of the course, but these attempts should begin in the fifth form. Of course, Larionov and Lebedev further developed ideas from the school program of 1915. According to the program, while performing homework, senior students had to show their awareness of the content of some literary work and recommended manuals on the topic under consideration (Ministry of Public Education, 1915).

The pre-revolutionary method of writing essays was established at the First All-Russian Congress of Language Teachers (1917). Alferov and Golubkov's speeches, as well the final resolution of the Congress, thoroughly assessed the methodology of writing essays and ways to improve it. Golubkov indicated "the unsatisfactory position of school essays" based on the analysis of teachers' questionnaires (The First All-Russian Congress, 1917, p. 37). He claimed that the main shortcomings of this method were the lack of students' creativity and the presentation of material already learned, as well as the one-sided logical nature of essays that barely touched students' emotions and imagination.

Alferov and Golubkov believed that the most important methodological question was the issue of students' motivation or interest in "the stated material and methods of its communication" (The First All-Russian Congress, 1917, p. 39). Both methodologists connected ways of heightening interest with the solution to the following three main problems: the individualization of essay



topics; in-depth work on outlines for essays on literary-historical topics; and the establishment of home essays as the main type of essay for students in their senior year. Based on Alferov's and Golubkov's reports, the Congress adopted a resolution on the written works of students where the main points were the convergence of topics with the personal interest of students, the development of creative abilities in the process of preparing and writing essays, and the individualization of essay topics (The First All-Russian Congress, 1917).

## Extension of Journalistic Themes in School Essays

My analysis of the works of nineteenth century Russian methodologists concerned with students' essays testifies to certain difficulties that not only beginner but also experienced teachers of Russian language and literature faced in the educational process. The problems with school essays were attributed to their complex hierarchy of topics (Belyavskii, 1889; Olshamovskii, 1880; Yakubovich, 1896). Along with literary topics, school essays involved themes not directly related to literary-historical materials. Methodological works in the last decades of the nineteenth century referred to such essay topics as abstract and were based on historical, geographical, cultural, and autobiographical materials. In the modern context, one would call such essay topics non-literary or journalistic.

What general tasks were defined by methodologists in the 1880s to 1890s for essays, regardless of their literary or non-literary (journalistic) topics? Mikhail Olshamovskii (1880) in his book *Guidelines for the Introduction of Written Exercises into High Schools* highlighted the following tasks:

- To determine the most useful types of writing exercises in high schools;
- To determine the sequence in which one type of written exercise should follow the other;
- To develop teaching methods and techniques that assist students in the successful and expedient execution of written exercises.

According to Olshamovskii (1880), the analysis of literary texts should be almost exclusively an oral exercise. This statement highlights the importance of journalistic topics in students' written exercises from a new perspective.

What connection should students' non-literary essays have with the other disciplines of the main high school curriculum? Methodologists had many disputes while addressing this issue. Thus, Konstantin Yakubovich (1896) emphasized "the connection of essays with Russian literature and the sphere of morality" (p. 12). Egor Belyavskii (1889) organized all essays in the senior high school forms into two equal groups: half of them belonged to the abstract



group and the other half was divided into historical and literary topics. Olshamovskii (1880) offered abstract, literary, and historical topics to senior high school students. Olshamovskii insisted that essays should have a wide range of associations with other academic disciplines, including history, geography, Russian and Western European literature, and classical Greek and Roman works studied during lessons on ancient languages. The scholar claimed that the expediency of this approach was determined by the fact that teachers could not limit the content of essays written by senior students to one sphere (literary or moral). In this case, topics from history, geography, literature, and the ancient world became an integral part of written exercises on literature. I believe that these changes transformed the essay from a genre situated within the framework of the literature discipline and into an essay of a supersubjective character. Olshamovskii's recommendations have a supersubjective basis—"topics should satisfy the following conditions: a) they should be unified, b) interesting, c) represent a short, precise and definite expression so that students do not have to wander away from the stated question" (Olshamovskii, 1880, p. 83). Yakubovich (1896) also wrote about the supersubjective basis of literature:

Nowadays combining the whole amount of school knowledge and concentrating it around one common center is only an ideal of education. However, Russian literature utilizes data from other school disciplines for drawing its own conclusions and serves to a certain extent as a connection between heterogeneous information of general and, in particular, real education. (p. 14)

The methodological manuals of that period distributed non-literary topics into various areas in a number of ways (Kholevius, 1912; Shumilovskii, 1910). Abstract (non-literary) topics from Olshamovskii's (1880) book *Guidelines for the Introduction of Written Exercises into High Schools* are as follows:

- Education: what kind of a person can be called well-educated;
- Knowledge, learning, books, travel;
- Labor and idleness: causes of idleness;
- Happiness, misfortune, troubles;
- Poverty, wealth, stinginess, thrift. Poverty is not a vice;
- Different attitudes of people to themselves. Self-cognition;
- Mutual relations between people and nature. The influence of people on nature;
- Mutual relations between people: humane and selfish;
- Mutual relations between people and their actions. What is hypocrisy;

- Human life, cities, states. The value of rivers and seas;
- Words and writing: an individual style represents the people themselves. (pp. 83-92)

Olshamovskii (1880) emphasized that the distribution proposed above was not rigid or fixed but that abstract topics were an integral part of essays. While teaching students to write essays, he insisted that the first essays offered to children in middle school should be devoted to abstract topics (Olshamovskii, 1880). Yakubovich (1896), a literature teacher whose works left a noticeable mark on methodology, also emphasized the supersubjective nature of literature in his speech “The Significance of the Russian Language in Education Systems.” Yakubovich (1896) confirmed this thought by describing school reading books on literature comprising historical stories and geographic notes besides literary works. Books for senior forms aimed to acquaint students with the most important literary techniques (Yakubovich, 1896). This situation was brought about by the fact that the objectives of studying literature at school were associated with the mastery of stylistic and grammatical norms of the Russian language rather than exact literary analysis, which became important in the twentieth century. The acquisition of literary skills was the decisive objective of introducing non-literary works in Russian schools in the late nineteenth century. The analysis of historical models used in the Russian essay in the nineteenth century demonstrates that it was not closely connected with historical and literary materials and addressed a wide range of journalistic topics.

The number of literary topics remained insignificant in the final years of high school (from the fifth to seventh forms). Students of the fifth to sixth forms studied major works of Russian literature from the eighteenth century, where moral or historical issues prevailed rather than the analysis of a certain artwork. For example, they studied “Summer and Winter Pleasures of Female Students” and “Causes and Effects of the Greco-Persian Wars” in the fifth form and “The Reasons that Caused the Development of Education in South-West Russia in the Seventeenth Century” in the sixth form (Istomin, 1891).

In my opinion, the prevalence of such near-literary topics encouraged students to approach the essay as an abstract and verbose reflection. The absence or insufficient presence of topics directly related to literary analysis led to the dominance of scholastic, general arguments about obvious truths in adolescents’ essays, and did not contribute to their literary development. These topics include the following themes for the sixth form:

- Very Old Man and Infant;
- Folk Literature;

- What Constitutes the Defense of the Motherland Against External Enemies;
- True Enlightenment Inextricably Connects Mental Development with Religious and Moral Ones. (Istomin, 1891, p. 15).

The seventh form (the final year at high schools) mostly dealt with literary-theoretical and literary-historical topics, usually of a comparative nature, for instance: “Tatyana and Olga in Pushkin’s Novel Eugene Onegin” and “The Comparison of D. I. Fonvizin’s Comedy ‘Brigadier-General’ and A. N. Ostrovsky’s (1885) Comedy ‘It’s a Family Affair—We’ll Settle It Ourselves’ Regarding the Idea and Separate Fictional Characters” (Istomin, 1891, p. 31).

The rapid growth of essay topics for high school in the early twentieth century prompted methodologists to classify them. One of these classifications, offered by Shumilovskii (1910), testifies to the broad humanitarian (not only literary-historical) orientation of essay topics even in high school. The methodologist determined several thematic fields for the senior year. Below are examples of specific topics:

- Literary: “Chekhov’s intellectuals,” “Famusov”;
- Historical: “Reforms of Peter the Great,” “The Founding of Saint Petersburg”;
- Geographical: “A Description of My Province,” “The Volga River”;
- Autobiographical: “My memories of high school”;
- Historical and cultural: “Life is Like a School.” (Shumilovskii, 1910).

By the end of the nineteenth century, journalistic topics in the Russian school accounted for 50 percent of the overall number of school essays. The importance of non-literary material for essay writing was proved by the fact that the school reading books on literature included historical stories and geographical notes. In fact, the significant number of journalistic essays justified the universal, supersubjective character of the discipline of literature.

## The Essay as Final Examination

Universities set high standards and requirements for the final school essay since it offered certain admission to the university. If a final school essay was rewarded with a “good” mark, the candidate could get enrolled at the university without entrance exams.

The methodology of essays established by the Curriculum of 1890 was supported by numerous theoretical developments. In the late nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century, the works by Brailovskii (1910, 1915), Istomin (1891), Filonov (1902), Ovsyaniko-Kulikovskii (1911), Shumi-

lovskii (1910), Larionov (1915), Alferov (1911), and Golubkov (1914) gained wide popularity. In Shumilovskii's (1910) opinion, to study in high school, one needs the ability to express, develop and justify thoughts. In other words, universities wanted to perceive their students not only as passive carriers of given knowledge but also as people who creatively assimilate such knowledge and develop it, "adding it to the circle of life" (Shumilovskii, 1910, p. 3). The latter could not be achieved without mastering the art of the word (Shumilovskii, 1910).

In the nineteenth century, the quality of literary education in high schools was mainly evaluated through the strengths and weaknesses of the final essay. Its importance was exemplified by the automatic university enrollment of those high school graduates who received high marks for their essays. Being the final test of literary knowledge, it reflected the level students achieved in high school and the starting level of knowledge of those who entered the university. The final essay "mostly tested the mastery of speech and then the knowledge of the corresponding literary-historical course, which should be taken into account when determining what literary skills high school graduates were expected to have" (Getmanskaya, 2015, p. 266).

The general list of themes of graduation essays for 1907 provides a good understanding of the degree of their productivity for the further literary development of graduates. The themes of the 1907 works can be divided into three groups:

- Reproductive topics that do not stimulate independent thoughts;
- Research essays that are not consistent with the age of students and increase the amount of work required for that age;
- Research topics corresponding to students' maturity and knowledge of Russian literature.

The theme "G. R. Derzhavin as a singer of Catherine II" (Filonov, 1908, p. 154) belongs to the first group. This topic involves considering Derzhavin solely as an apologist for the ruling monarch. This topic could help form a citizen loyal to the government, but not a humanistic thinker. The first group also included archaic topics that could not arouse students' sustained interest. For example, the topic "What requirements does *Domostroy* impose on a person?" (Filonov, 1908, p. 160) has nothing to do with artistic and imaginative thinking and requires only the reproduction of well-known historical information about the system of patriarchal despotism.

The second group comprised research topics that were not consistent with the age of students. For example, the topics "Indicate different ideals of Russian society through literary monuments" and "Nature in the works of first-class poets" (Filonov, 1908, pp. 90, 186).

The third group was represented by research topics corresponding to students' maturity and knowledge of Russian literature. While analyzing the presented high school essays, we could include only one essay from the Irkutsk high school among the research topics: "Peter the Great in A. S. Pushkin's poetry and prose" (Filonov, 1908. p. 186).

Thus, research topics represented a small fragment of the total number of essays. At this stage, the clichéness and repeatability of topics became a significant obstacle to high-quality final school essays. In addition, the final goals of school essays were to promote the development of logical thinking and consolidate the ideas of the literary works under study in the minds of students. However, these objectives were difficult to accomplish because an essay presented what was already learned in the class and reproduced the known material in a mechanical manner.

The new (homework) form of composition for the upper classes of the high school remedied the problems with stereotyped, mechanistic essays. These exercises gradually turned from a 90-minute classroom task in the upper classes into a homework assignment. In his textbook *Mother Tongue in Middle School*, Alferov (1911) justified the transfer of essays from classroom tasks to home assignments by the fact that the older the students were the more material they should have had to work on. Therefore, the more important homework would come at the final stages of high school education. He believed that this way of working with texts corresponded to the conditions students faced at universities (Alferov, 1911). Alferov (1911) proposed replacing several small essays in the senior year with one yearly essay prepared at home, and he raised the requirements for its quality. He developed a detailed methodology for such essays in the eighth form, including reading lists on each topic. To write the essay on "I. S. Turgenev's Main Views on His Correspondence" and "Poems in Prose," Alferov (1911) recommended reading the following books:

- *The Collection of I. S. Turgenev's Letters* (1884);
- I. S. Turgenev's *Collected Works* (1898);
- I. A. Ivanov, *I. S. Turgenev* (1896);
- I. D. Galperin-Kaminskii, *Unpublished Letters of I. S. Turgenev to Madame Viardot and His French Friends* (1900);
- D. N. Ovsyaniko-Kulikovskii, *Turgenev* (1909);
- A. A. Izmailov, *The Twilight of Godlings and New Idols* (1910). (Alferov, 1911, p. 276).

To evaluate I. S. Turgenev's views based on his epistolary heritage, students had to conduct research and analyze both the letters of I. S. Turgenev and

other literary sources. The extended list of references and the long period for writing the essay (an entire academic year) brought the methodology of final essays in line with the rules for working on a scientific paper in universities.

Alferov (1911) was not the only one who proposed using references. All the high-profile manuals that aimed at the development of students' independent activity were comprised of long lists of additional literature. In particular, Shumilovskii (1910) believed that "a textbook should be followed by a popular book, which is succeeded by a scientific work" (Shumilovskii, 1910, p. 6) in the process of writing an essay.

In the early twentieth century, Russian universities and institutes introduced entrance examinations. The essay was essentially a mandatory exam for applicants to all higher education institutions, so its role increased dramatically in high school and in higher education. In general, at this historical stage, essays contributed to the strengthening of writing skills related to a wide range of humanitarian knowledge required in both philological and non-philological higher education, as well as in addressing the social and civic tasks of high school graduates and in the process of literary self-education.

## Conclusion

Essays became the main form of assessment for high school students in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Summarizing the development of essays in high and middle school, we should note there were significant methodological failures along with general positive trends. They can be explained by the following factors:

- The prevalence of reproductive approaches;
- Significant differences between actual school essays and generally progressive ministerial recommendations;
- The mass distribution of underdeveloped manuals (ready-made essays and outlines reproducing the content of some literary work).

These reasons conditioned the weakened position of graduation essays. At this stage, the main task was to introduce a productive essay methodology. S. N. Brailovskii (1910, 1915), V. A. Istomin (1891), A. G. Filonov (1902), D. N. Ovsyaniko-Kulikovskii (1911), L. I. Shumilovskii (1910), S. S. Larionov (1915), A. D. Alferov (1911), and V. V. Golubkov (1914) proposed a number of measures to resolve problems with the established essay practice, namely:

- The use of a wide range of topics;
- The transformation of essays into a research task;

- The clear correspondence between essay topics and the level of the students.

The development of essays during this period, their regular use in high school, and the expansion of compulsory middle school writing programs through topics and additional literature enable us to see that writing skills were the basis for continuing literary education in institutions of higher education. At the same time, graduation essays checked the formation of students' individual style and only then their literary-historical knowledge. The general humanitarian orientation of essays in high school (along with literary topics, historical, geographical, moral, and natural-science ones were used) testified to the non-special nature of teaching essays during literature lessons. This non-special nature ensured stable writing skills in any institution of higher education, including philological ones, as well as outside the walls of higher education institutions (i.e., in a wide range of social duties common to high school graduates). The simultaneous functioning of essays as the final form of checking the literary knowledge of senior students and the main evaluation criterion for entering any specialized university determined the constitutive value of essays for the Russian school throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

After the post-revolutionary reforms, school essays lost their broad humanitarian tendency. The hypertrophy of the literary-historical course which exists in high school today is the result of a long, timely tracing of academic approaches to the study of literature in high school. In order to return school essays to the category of exercises that contribute to the creative development of students' skills and extensive humanitarian education, it is worth taking a closer look at the experience of Russian educators and pedagogical theorists in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, when the development of written language was based not mainly on historical and literary material, but on ethical, cultural and general educational subjects.

Improving the model of the final literature essay for today's high school graduates is an acute problem discussed not only in the professional teaching environment but also at the government level. What should this essay be like, given that it is already mandatory for all graduates? At the discussion stage, opinions on this issue were rather disparate: a philosophical essay, a critical reasoning essay, an essay upon a literary work, a research project based on the literary material, the analysis of a movie scene, a spoken reply to a question, a detailed commentary on a literary quotation, etc. The number of scenarios and proposals increased, but this did not clarify the situation. Nowadays, when the question of the genre of the final work has been resolved, experts



still have a lot to do in order to clarify the basic expectations of an essay, its evaluation and the inclusion of the rich historical experience of using essays in Russian schools.

In this context, a retrospective analysis of the final school essay allows us to avoid those mistakes that had long been present in the domestic methodology, a struggle reflected in the success of the essay as a final test of students' knowledge. Today it should be borne in mind that the main obstacles in the historical development of the essay have included non-conformity of topics to the age abilities of pupils, the predominance of reproductive approaches (in which students could find obvious answers to essay questions in textbooks), and erroneous criteria for assessing written works.

In the twenty-first century, we have returned to a moment in which school essays are a significant component of school-leaving exams (and thus university admissions) and in which essay-writing and the teaching of writing are leaving the domain of literature and becoming more broadly humanistic in nature. The formation process of the school essay a century ago described in this chapter is in a certain parallel with the current state of the methodology and can help to overcome possible errors in the work of modern instructors and researchers.

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