

Saint Petersburg Classical High School (1989 - 2009)

Classical education in its traditional form, that of a classical high school, existed in Russia from the beginning of the nineteenth century until 1917. Not long after the revolution, classical high schools and ordinary secondary schools were replaced by a unified Soviet secondary school system in which the teaching of classical languages did not play a part. Soviets continually ignored classical education, with the exception of a very short period in which an aging Stalin decided to revive not only the pre-revolutionary tradition of school uniforms, but also the teaching of Latin. Soon after Stalin's death neither of these reforms remained in effect.

Such was the situation in 1989 when a group of young scholars from Leningrad decided to pursue an idea which most Soviet classicists had considered as unattainable as they did desirable – to bring back the study of classical languages to the school system. Fortunately our generation could benefit from the experience of those who graduated from pre-revolutionary high schools; at this time we had little chance of finding out how high schools were set up in the West and even less time to undertake such a project. We had to take advantage of the moment when the first cracks appeared in the monolith of Soviet education and the teaching of classical languages in high schools became once again acceptable.

We did not simply rename an old school, but founded a new one, having obtained after a long struggle a large building in the Petrograd area, near the center of St. Petersburg. During our first year we had fifty-two pupils and nine teachers, who became the core of a growing group of friends and scholars of similar interests. Currently in our school there are more than ninety teachers, whose average age is between thirty and forty (relatively young when compared to former Soviet schools). Each year two or three parents of children in our school also choose to share teaching duties, evidence of their commitment and devotion to the ideals upon which our school was founded.

It took 18 years for the administration of the school to persuade the authorities that Latin and Ancient Greek are important subjects, and in 2007 the school finally received the accreditation certificate that states that Latin and Ancient Greek are compulsory disciplines in the curriculum.

St. Petersburg Classical Gymnasium is one of the winners of the 2007 and 2008 All-Russian competition for innovative programs organized within the framework of the National Project, “Education”.

Public recognition in Russia coincided with the good news from Rome that one of our pupils won the first prize at the international competition in Ancient Greek.

It would have been impossible to establish such a school depending exclusively upon high school teachers who had worked in the former Soviet school system; for that matter, there simply were no teachers of classical languages in these schools. Therefore from the very beginning we decided to involve a younger generation of scholars and academics who would be able to combine their own academic work with teaching. About forty percent of our teachers

hold other positions outside of the high school: at the Academy of Sciences, at universities, colleges and other institutions of higher learning in St. Petersburg. This allows us to raise the standard of teaching to a higher level, as well as to reduce the rift between high school and post-secondary education so characteristic of the Soviet period. This also brings about new problems: many of our teachers do not possess adequate pedagogical training or experience, but this deficiency is compensated in part by the great enthusiasm which these teachers bring to our school.

Our school is not a private school. We do not charge our students tuition. Our school is financed for the most part out of the municipal budget; despite the fact that these funds are never adequate, we prefer not to charge the parents of our pupils. Instead, we try to find alternative sources of funding, although such an approach is much more complicated. One such source of funding has been the publication of textbooks.

During the Soviet period there were simply no classical language textbooks; therefore, for the first two years our teachers had to rely on photocopies of pre-revolutionary textbooks. Thanks to the financial support of several German foundations (*Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, Bosch Stiftung, Stiftung Humanismus Heute*), our school was able to translate and publish several new Latin and Greek textbooks and dictionaries: the Latin course IANUA NOVA, consisting of five books; the Greek course PROPULAIKA, consisting of two books; and Latin-Russian and Greek-Russian dictionaries. The International Soros Foundation provided the necessary computer equipment for this project. Three to five thousand copies of each textbook were printed; these books are currently being used by high schools in St. Petersburg and other cities throughout Russia. The profits from the publication of these textbooks were used to create a computer class for the pupils of our school.

Our school deals with all problems internally. The school administration, the principal and four vice-principals, were chosen by a School Council consisting of fifteen teachers. The Council directs the development of our school and supervises the administration.

Instruction in our school begins in the fifth grade and continues through the eleventh. Students are selected on the basis of entrance examinations that determine the general development and erudition of the child, as well as his or her aptitude in analytical thinking. Each year we have three to four applicants for each place in the fifth grade; thus from more than two hundred applicants, we select two groups of twenty-five.

From the fifth grade students study Latin (5 hours per week), and from the seventh grade, Greek (4 hours per week). In classical and modern language instruction each class group is divided into two sections. Each section consists of ten to thirteen students, allowing more individualized attention. One of the most important subjects in our school is mathematics. Students may only advance to the next grade level after passing an in-depth mathematics test. Instruction in the natural sciences takes up a smaller portion of the total instructional hours than in other high schools, but as instruction is more intensive, our students are able to cover nearly as much material the shorter time period we allot. Generally speaking, the ability of our school to select only the most promising students allows us to cover a much more intensive and

expanded school curriculum within the standard number of academic hours (33-38 hours per week) for state schools.

The selection of students does not end with their admittance to the high school. At the end of each academic year students in each class take cumulative exams and, if their results are not satisfactory, they may be expelled from the school. We strive to make instruction in our school not interesting and easy, but interesting and challenging.

Despite a very heavy academic workload, many students choose to remain after school in order to participate in optional elective courses and activity groups. They study history, French, art and computer science, and participate in theatre, chess, basketball and tennis groups as well. For many of the students the school has become a second home which they are reluctant to leave.

The rebirth of classical education may be seen from a Western standpoint as one of the most significant indicators of Russia's re-entrance into the family of European nations. For many of our Western colleagues, such reappearance has served as fuel in the fight against the reduction of the number of classical high schools in their own countries. In the last few years there has hardly been a month in which a foreign guest has not visited our school. Many of these visitors have become both our partners and friends in this endeavor. The Association of Teachers of Classical Languages in Secondary Schools, EUROCLASSICA (of which our school is the only Russian member), has been of great assistance to us. On the invitation of EUROCLASSICA, teachers from our school have taken part in conferences in Holland, England and Spain.

For us contact with foreign schools has served not only as a means of acquiring new experience, but also as an opportunity for our students to compete with graduates from other European high schools and establish whether they are equipped to study in European universities. We strive to provide our graduates with an adequate knowledge of modern languages which would allow the best of them to continue their education abroad (if they so desire). In addition to two classical languages, two modern languages are also taught in our school - English and German. Each year young teachers and students come to us from the U.S., Canada, England, Germany and Switzerland. These young teachers conduct conversation sections at all grade levels while simultaneously perfecting their own knowledge of Russian. During summer vacation our school regularly sends several groups of students to Germany. These trips serve both as good language experience, as well as an excellent motivation for the study of German.

At the moment our school remains the only classical high school in St. Petersburg, which is of course insufficient for a city of five million. The study and popularization of ancient civilizations demands more specialists than currently exist in Russia. Nevertheless we do not take it upon ourselves to cultivate future professional classicists from among our graduates; rather, we hope that they will successfully find their own places in a broad spectrum including both the natural sciences and the arts and humanities. At the moment it is not inconceivable that in time a person schooled in ancient history and culture, rather than in the history of the

Communist Party, will appear among our country's politicians. Of course, knowledge of ancient history does not prevent political errors or politics directed against one's own people. Nevertheless, one may hope that the study of ancient civilizations, both their positive and negative aspects, will provide more than knowledge of discrete facts. More specifically, such study will provide the background for the humanist ideals that have become so important in the modern world. While Russia's current interest in the West often results in copying only the worst aspects of modern mass culture, it is important that students understand the historical background for the fundamental values that have allowed modern western democracies to develop.

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