

“School of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania Studies”: remarks on experience of advance training of young historians

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After the collapse of the USSR Belarusian historical scholarship as well as that of the post-soviet republics faced a number of various scientific and methodological problems. Historiography still used Marxist methodology that had become outdated long ago and did not let to solve majority of scientific issues. Since then it was the only correct approach to historical science and it did not allow new trends to take roots in Belarusian historiography. Restrictions and prohibitions also affected a choice of research subjects. Study of Belarusian history of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (here and after referred to as the GDL) period was not approved as it collided with ideological concept of “Moscow as the only one legitimate unifier of Slavic lands”. Historians of the Middle Ages were allowed to research only socio-economic subjects mainly dealing with the history of peasantry. The researches were to prove “exploitation and oppression of Belarusian peasants by Lithuanian feudal lords.” After 1991 there was a true raise of interest to historical studies of the GDL in Belarus. For example, studies of Mikola Ermalovich made us see history of Belarus and its statehood differently. Contemporary Belarusian scholarship made a true boost compared to the Soviet period, subjects on political, cultural, religious and social history of the GDL started to be studied in wider scale. However, methodological problems remained unsolved in many respects, despite the fact that Doctoral Studies Programs were to make a focus on particularly this aspect. This problem is added by a break of ties between the scholars from the neighboring countries and a lack of information on scholarly achievements abroad. Such a situation unfortunately did not encourage professional development of young historians.

A lack of succession in professional historians training, few opportunities for advance training and getting information on contemporary research methods and tools became a reason why the Grodna Public Association of Young

Intellectuals “VIT” launched a long-term scholarly program “Study of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania”. Siarhei Salei, Natallia Slizh and Siarhei Kaun¹ were responsible for the program coordination.

The first step of the program was implementation of the project “School of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania Studies” which was aimed at advanced training of young researchers of the GDL in terms of content, methodology, as well as research and teaching methods and tools at the levels of **knowledge, comprehension, and application**, due to classification of educational goals given by B. Bloom (1956).

Project description

Doctoral students, PhDs, as well as last-year university students from Polotsk, Minsk and Grodno participated in the project “School of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania Studies”, totally 24 people. It should be noticed that Public Association “VIT” is experienced in implementation of scholarly projects, but it was a debut in history field which was rather successful and became much publicized event in the country.

“School of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania Studies” supposed conduction of a set of seminars on key courses: source study, research methods and tools, computing for historians, and interactive teaching methods. These subjects were selected purposely since each historian should start his/her scholarly career with majoring them. However, young historians are not trained in Belarusian universities so that they gain practical research skills; they rather receive general theoretical background related to their fields of study. And this is insufficient for conducting research in specific historical topic. Besides that, a training system at the universities is rather conservative and narrow for new trends in research and teaching methodology. Thus, students do not always

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have an opportunity to get introduced to peculiarities of contemporary historical science development. Study of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania requires a historian have solid background. He/she must at least read and understand Belarusian, Polish, Ukrainian, Russian, Latin, Old Belarusian, Old Polish, Lithuanian, English and German languages, know sources' specifics, peculiarities of the epoch, etc. It is very difficult to train such a specialist. Many Belarusian scholars improve their knowledge individually in order to become proficient in the chosen field of study. Therefore, actuality and necessity of gaining proper basic competences for young Belarusian historians appeared obvious.

Four seminars were conducted within the framework of the project, including "Sources on the GDL History", "Research Methods and Tools", "Computing for Historians", and "Innovative Teaching Methods and Tools". They were conducted during the academic year 2001-2002, once in two months. Each seminar lasted three days and schedule was pretty busy: workday started at 9 am and ended at 7 pm. All sessions were structured according to the following scheme: the first part was a lecture presenting an issue in question followed by a discussion, and another part was a practical training in application of concepts presented. Before the beginning of each seminar the project participants received its draft agenda describing the main subject of the seminar, so that they had an opportunity to prepare brief presentations of their own achievements on the issues to be discussed.

The leading international and Belarusian specialists were invited to contribute at the seminars: Janos Bak (Hungary), Gerhard Jaritz (Austria), Heorhi Halenchanka, Ales Krautsevich, Ales Hrusha, Halina Dzerbina, Valiantsin Holubev, Henadz Semainchuk, Aliaksandr Nechuhryn, Dzmitryi Yatskevich, Mikhail Vaitovich, Dzmitryi Karpievich, Alena Karpievich, Dzmitryi Hubarevich, Siarhei Kaun, Siarhei Salei, and Natallia Slizh.

As it was mentioned above, each seminar was devoted to a specific subject. General classification of sources and classification of the sources on GDL history were considered at the First Seminar. In spite there are handbooks and articles published, this subject currently is not completely worked out and therefore did not lose its actuality, as each researcher should place a chapter into his/her thesis where he/she should present and analyze the sources for the subject used. That is why methods and tools of source study and interpretation were presented and discussed at the sessions. Information got let the audience to improve their preliminary achievements on source study basis of their researches.

Many Belarusian historians notice that the weakest point of all Doctoral dissertations is research methods and tools used. It often happens that researchers are not aware of latest achievements and trends in application of research method and tools in international scholarship and can suggest nothing but traditional research techniques in their field, and this in its turn narrows researcher's opportunities to interpret sources and therefore non-trivial conclusions can be rarely found in such researches. Thus, Second Seminar was dedicated to exactly this issue. Both traditional and innovative methods of historical research were studied there, including but not limited to semiotics, hermeneutics, gender theory, retrospective method, and others.

The Third Seminar was aimed at introduction of new trends in Computing for Historians. Personal computer became an integrated working tool of any historian nowadays. It can be used not just for Word processing but for sta-

tistical analysis of sources, projecting diagrams and maps, and for development of historical databases. This approach could be utilized in the majority of historical researches, which was confirmed by presentations prepared by the project participants.

Due to the fact that majority of Belarusian historians are not just scholars, but also teach at the University level, the Forth Seminar was focused over innovative teaching methodology. At this seminar participants through their personal experience got to know how it is possible to teach history interestingly using active teaching methods.

The main methods applied at the first three seminars were problematic lecture followed by discussion, presentation of research projects, and general discussion. The fourth seminar was interactive both in content and in methods applied: via direct participation trainees were introduced to the methods of interactive game, role play, case study, interrupted lecture, etc.

An integrated part of each seminar was specific session on getting feedback from the participants and on planning of usage of knowledge and skills gained at the seminar in their scholarly and teaching activities; at the same time participants discussed their joint activities on dissemination and usage of information received. It should be noticed that the majority of participants showed themselves open to new knowledge and motivated for change; and all that facilitated efficient communication among project participants both at implementation stage and after it was completed.

Materials and results of project were collected and prepared for publication in two editions: **The Grand Duchy of Lithuania: Research Methods and Tools** and **The Grand Duchy of Lithuania: Historiography and Sources**. The first edition has been already published. It includes articles both on traditional historical research methodology and on innovative methods and tools widely used internationally. The peculiarity of this edition is that it illustrates how to apply certain research tools for analysis of the GDL sources. This information can be useful for both beginners and experienced historians. The publication gives an opportunity to get acquainted with the materials of the "School of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania Studies" for those who were not able to participate in its sessions.

Project evaluation

To analyze the influence the project "School of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania Studies" on scholarly community the organizers envisaged a multilevel system for efficiency follow-up. The project evaluation was based on the model proposed by D. Kirkpatrick (1959, 1996) and was applied at the levels of (1) **reaction**, or immediate feedback of the audience on each session, (2) **learning**, or follow-up of the changes that happened to participants' knowledge at each seminar, (3) **behavior**, or analysis of how participants used acquired knowledge and skills in their everyday practice, and (4) **results**, or follow-up of in what degree the project results effected general level of Belarusian historical science and, particularly, establishments that participants represented.

In practical terms it happened in the following way:

(1) Both after every session and during special reflection sessions at the end of each seminar free exchange of opinion took place regarding what content participants liked best of all and what they did not like, or whether offered information

and methods can be used in practice or not. At the end of each seminar participants were questioned, that gave an organizers an opportunity to get to know how young scholars **reacted** to its content and find out the ways of improvement of further seminars. Majority of participants noticed in their questionnaires that seminars were very useful for them, participants felt satisfied with their work, communication, content and teaching methods used at the seminars.

(2) A specific questionnaire was developed by the organizers to evaluate what participants **learned** from the seminars. The audience mentioned exact pieces of knowledge and skills gained, which they were going to apply in their teaching and/or research. The average mark to evaluate usefulness of the topics presented was 1,8 points at 2-mark scale. This witnesses that almost all chosen topics were demanded by the target group. The results of the seminar on innovative teaching methodology turned to be the most contradictory that can be explained by suspicious participants' attitude towards possibility to change their own role of an "expert in content" in teaching process.

(3) After completion of the project "School of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania Studies" communications with the participants kept on. First of all, the project organizers interacted with the participants of the seminars and their supervisors, tracked scholarly achievements of the participants and application of knowledge and skills gained in frames of the project, i.e. changes in their **behavior** in practice (publications, presentations at conferences, etc.). One year and a half after the project has been completed, the Grodna Public Association of Young Intellectuals "VIT" with support of IREX organized a specific workshop "Application of Contemporary Research Methods and Tools in History" (7-9.11.2003), at which almost all participants of the project had an opportunity to present results of their researches achieved with support of the knowledge and skills gained at the "School of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania Studies".

(4) Three years which passed after completion of the project "School of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania Studies" is enough to evaluate the **results** of the project efficiency. It is obvious that former participants of the School became the "change leaders" in their research and educational institutions. They influence subjects and methodology of researches conducted in their institutions, disseminate acquired knowledge among their colleagues, implement joint innovative scholarly projects. We can speak now about creation of a true community of young Belarusian GDL scholars and a role of the project and its participants in it is undoubted.

Experience and perspectives

As practice shows not just state research and educational institutions can participate in training of young historians but also public associations. This is not a unique Belarusian experience of conducting schools for historians: various sci-

entific associations, centers, foundations, organizations conduct them abroad. However, the project described the first event of such type that took place in Belarus. It was conducted by local historians supported by the department of Medieval Studies of the Central European University (Hungary). Thanks to the world-known historians Prof. Janos Bak and Prof. Gerhard Jaritz the audience was introduced to the latest trends in history teaching and research. Their presentations were supported by reference books, manuals, CDs disseminated among the participants. The project facilitated the transfer of scholarly knowledge and skills from the leading Belarusian and international historians, who presented practical results of their latest researches. Project participants got an opportunity for individual consultations and presentation of preliminary results of their researches. Besides that, the project facilitated establishment and strengthening of contacts between young historians and between historians of different generations as well.

Mentioned above does not mean that we should deny traditional historical education. It gives basic professional education and diploma (certificate) officially recognizing profession got. Significant lack in traditional educational system is that it rather conservative and not so quick in acquisition of new ideas and trends in the field of teaching and research. In this sense public associations are more flexible and quicker in adjusting to the innovations. Their training programs and projects must be competitive and must differ from what is offered by the universities. But this does not mean that such educational projects of public associations must be isolated from academies. Exactly cooperation between institutions of formal and informal education with a chance to transmit experience gained seems to be the most perspective. And educational programs of public associations being more flexible can be a specific "pilot site" for innovative methods and tools, which later on can be adapted by traditional educational institutions.

It is also important to choose a subject on which additional education is needed and project activity is possible. The History of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was chosen purposefully. Analysis of Belarusian historiography shows that this direction is weakly developed in historical scholarship and, consequently, it is rather perspective in respect of development and training of specialists. Belarusian scholarship significantly lags behind European one in researching of this period in the history of the region. Thus, there is a need to study experience of the world historical scholarship and try to conduct researches on a proper level to incorporate them into the world historiography. A necessary condition for successful implementation of a project idea is a proper professional training of organizers, their skills in the chosen field and surely a target group to which the event is urgent and useful. Taking into account current situation in historical scholarship, with a purpose to support its development, participation of the 'third sector' organizations in informal training and popularization of historical heritage is becoming more and more necessary.

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