Unlike so many other European countries Russia had no universities at all before 1755, at which time Moscow University was founded. Education, such as it was both before and after this, was intended, from the government’s point of view, to help young noblemen acquire modern technical skills to be of service to the state. From the individual’s viewpoint, schooling, at least a certain bare minimum, was necessary for promotion within the ordained Table of Ranks and to be able to conduct oneself properly within social circles. Consequently, the standard curriculum itself was framed with these attitudes and needs in mind. Emphasis was placed on such subjects as classical literature, good manners and modern languages, particularly French, the language of diplomacy, culture and all things that would interest an aspiring young man. Education for its own sake was certainly not the prevalent attitude within Russia. Subjects of no clear utilitarian value had no place as such within the school. As Alexandre Koyré, the eminent philosopher and historian of science, once remarked, pure philosophy was always considered “perfectly useless”.¹

Yet there were those, such as Lomonosov, co-founder of Moscow University and the greatest Russian-born scientist of the time, who sought to encourage and foster the love of learning. They realized that unless higher education directly benefitted the prospective student he would not attend a university even for a brief time. For such an institution to be successful its students would have to be rewarded with the one thing that really mattered to them, a proportionately high service rank. Within years this basic idea became accepted and the awarding of an academic degree bestowed on the individual such a service rank. Yet most young noblemen realized that there were other, faster ways of moving up within the Table of Ranks and so found no tangible motive for seeking advanced learning.² This situation was not remedied until the 1830s at which time the young aristocracy began flocking to the universities, particularly the one in Moscow. Until then the enrollment was largely confined to the sons of priests.
This fundamentally anti-intellectual feature of Russian society, arising out of a lack of suitable institutions should help make understandable why philosophy arrived so late on the scene. Without the proper institutions and inducements to attend these institutions, intellectual contemplation was simply viewed as a waste of precious time. Without a change in government policy institutions of higher education could not be established nor would they then prosper. This, at least, is the view proposed by Alexander Vvedensky, the most prominent of the Russian neo-Kantians and whose name will reoccur prominently in a future installment of this work. The example of Gregory Skovoroda, held by many historians, including Vvedensky, to be the first Russian philosopher, does not, according to this opinion, constitute proof to the contrary. Skovoroda, whose life spans the period in question but who never held a professorship, published none of his writings, and his influence was confined to his native Ukraine. As Vvedensky remarked, Skovoroda passed without leaving a trace.3

Vvedensky's argument may serve as an explanation as to why philosophy never attained broad recognition as a legitimate, professional domain of inquiry. Yet it cannot explain away the appearance of Skovoroda as an outstanding individual; it can merely say that he was an exception. Nevertheless, even a brief scan of the pages of history will reveal a number of considerably greater philosophers who lived in an earlier age, had no institutional affiliation and who resided in countries without a long professional philosophical tradition. Consequently, Vvedensky's argument is hardly satisfactory as to why Russia produced no outstanding philosophical minds prior to Skovoroda. But it is also quite incapable of explaining, and this is its apparent intent, why philosophy did not become a focus of attention among the educated public prior to the spread of Hegelianism well into the 19th century. After all, other disciplines had attracted considerable attention already in the 18th century. Nor is it accurate to say that the educated lacked the leisure time required. Already by the mid-1700s there was a general loosening of the requirement of state service to enable educated young men sufficient opportunity to pursue their own interests. In this way writing and the study of literature came into being. In addition, the curriculum at many of the military training schools was lax enough to permit many of the cadets ample free time. Catherine the Great's