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THE STUDY OF RUSSIAN IN BELGIUM

0. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to briefly outline the present state of Russian language teaching and of scientific research into Russian linguistics at the Slavic departments of Belgian universities. Within the confines of this article no attention will be paid to other fields of study essential to the education of a Slavist, such as Russian literature or Old Church Slavonic. The study of Old Russian does come within the scope of this survey.

1. UNIVERSITIES AND COLLEGES

In Belgium, Russian language courses have been offered at universities, colleges and evening classes since the end of the 19th century. The first chair of Slavic languages and literature was established at the University of Brussels in 1926.

Although the standard of education at Belgian universities and colleges (‘hogescholen’) is officially the same, it should be underlined that in practice the curricula of both types of institute differ fundamentally and that very different objectives are pursued. The teaching of Russian at the colleges is in all instances part of the training for interpreters/translators and has a purely pragmatic orientation. In the light of the (economic) reform process in the republics of the former Soviet Union, which has created a new demand for translators and interpreters, this may account for the fact that in Belgium more students of Russian are enrolled in these institutes than in the Slavic departments. Although strictly speaking the colleges are beyond the scope of this outline, when we take into account their relatively large number in Belgium it seems useful to briefly summarize how the teaching of Russian is organized here.

1.1. Colleges

In the eight Belgian colleges where Russian is taught, a total of 561 students of Russian enrolled in 1995. The curriculum consists of two successive two-year cycles with an average of 6 to 8 hours of Russian a week, in addition to an equal number of English, French or German classes. Combinations with other foreign languages taught as majors in these institutes are not permitted. In the first two
years, the so-called candidature (‘kandidatuur’), Russian language teaching is traditionally divided into grammar, practical language instruction, ‘landeskunde’ (knowledge of Russian history, geography and institutions) and translation, with a stress on translation into the mother tongue. In the third and fourth years, the so-called licence (‘licentie’), translation courses are substantially enlarged, with the emphasis shifting to translation into Russian. Grammar at this stage is dealt with merely as part of the translation courses and practical language training. The approach to linguistics is thus, as noted above, purely pragmatic. There is no room for grammatical theory or scientific explanations.

All students of Russian at the colleges take the translation courses. At the end of the third year, the student can go in for an elective ‘interpreting test’. The aim of this examination is to reveal whether a person qualifies for the special interpreting course in the fourth and in some instances also a fifth year. As part of their final examinations students have to write a thesis. As a rule these are not scientific papers, but annotated translations of literary, scientific or technical texts, varying in size from approximately 30 to 150 pages. The degree which the colleges award is that of Licence in Translation or Licence in Interpreting. College graduates do not have access to a doctorate, nor are they, officially, entitled to teach in high-schools, colleges or universities. For those who do have these ambitions there is a possibility to attend a special two-year university program.

1.2. Universities

Three universities in Belgium offer a complete four-year degree course leading to the degree of Licence in Slavic Philology or East European languages and cultures (the Licence is comparable to the MA Degree). These are the Free University of Brussels\(^2\) (the Slavic Department of which was established in 1926), the State University of Ghent (Slavic Department established in 1958) and the Catholic University of Louvain (Slavic Department established in 1970). At these three Slavic departments, a total of 320 students enrolled in 1995, 103 of whom were freshmen. The academic year runs from the end of September to the middle of May. In addition to Russian, which in the first cycle comprises grammar (2 hours a week) and practical language instruction (2-3 hours), the curriculum includes an introduction to Old Russian and/or Old Church Slavonic, Russian literature and Russian history. Furthermore, the student must choose a second and even a third Slav language (Bulgarian, Polish, Serbo-Croatian or Czech). Students who so wish can spend one to several months at a Russian university at some time during the four-year course. However, this does not constitute an official part of the curriculum and is sometimes hard to combine with the educational programme provided for in Belgium, due to the specific features of the Belgian examination system\(^3\). The number of government grants available for participation in the