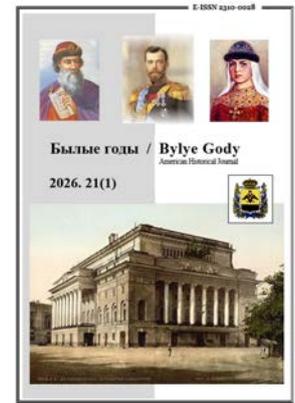


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Published in the USA
 Bylye Gody
 Issued since 2006.
 E-ISSN: 2310-0028
 2026. 21(1): 491-496
 DOI: 10.13187/bg.2026.1.491

Journal homepage:
<https://bg.cherkasgu.press>



The Socio-Demographic Composition of Kharkiv University Students during World War I

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Abstract

The article reconstructs and interprets the social structure of the student body at Kharkiv University during the 1914–1916 academic years. The study is based on mass administrative sources – official printed lists of students for the 1914–1915 and 1915–1916 academic years that provide systematic information on faculty affiliation and social origin, recorded in estate-based categories. Methodologically, the study combines a comprehensive quantitative analysis with a qualitative institutional interpretation of the data, enabling analysis at two levels: the university as a whole and a comparative faculty-level perspective. The results demonstrate that the university entered the wartime period with a socially mixed profile rather than a strictly noble-dominated one. Students of burgher origin constituted the core of the student body, while the nobility retained a significant presence, and the peasant component was already substantial at the beginning of the war. A comparison between the 1914–1915 and 1915–1916 academic years reveals a consistent direction of change: the share of nobles decreased, the proportion of students of peasant origin increased, and burghers maintained their dominant position. These shifts indicate that the war did not generate social transformation *ex nihilo* but rather intensified pre-existing tendencies within the university. A comparative faculty-level analysis reveals a pronounced asymmetry in wartime dynamics. The Faculty of Medicine functioned as the most socially open segment of the university and displayed the strongest growth of students of peasant origin, supporting the interpretation of medical education as a channel of professional mobility under conditions of wartime demand. In contrast, the Faculty of History and Philology remained the most elite part of the university, maintaining a comparatively high share of noble students and demonstrating strong institutional inertia. The Faculty of Law occupied an intermediate position, combining a notable noble presence with a stable burgher core, while the Faculty of Physics and Mathematics exhibited the greatest structural stability and the slowest pace of social change. The article argues that the impact of World War I on the social composition of Kharkiv University should be understood primarily as a catalytic effect rather than a decisive disruption. The observed transformations are interpreted as selective (asymmetrical) modernization, in which openness by social origin increased unevenly across faculties, whereas other boundaries, most notably the gender boundary of the classical university remained unchanged in the analyzed period. The findings provide an empirically grounded basis for further research on 1917–1918, when revolutionary developments may have altered not only quantitative proportions but also the institutional principles of access, accounting, and governance in higher education.

Keywords: Kharkiv University, social structure, social origin, higher education history, social mobility.

1. Introduction

The social history of universities in the Russian Empire in the early twentieth century allows us to view higher education not only as an educational system but also as a tool for recruitment, professionalization,

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and social mobility. The university retained its corporate features and traditions while simultaneously responding to societal changes: economic development, the growing role of professions, and shifting educational attitudes and expectations among the urban strata. The Great War of 1914–1918 was a transformative factor, including within the higher education system. It affected student enrollment numbers, career strategies, and the demand for specific specialties. However, the war did not serve as a "universal equalizer". The university's response was uneven and largely dependent on its faculties: applied fields were more likely to open up to non-privileged groups, whereas the humanities maintained a high degree of social selectivity. The events of the February and October Revolutions of 1917 radically changed the political environment of the university, yet they did not signify the immediate termination of university tradition. At the level of institutional continuity, it is more accurate to speak of a transitional period from 1917 to 1920 – when the university operated under conditions of autocracy, crisis management, and the revision of administrative models and subsequently of the systemic reform of the Soviet era. This reform led to the transformation of the classical university into an Institute of Public Education in 1920, with the partial preservation of its material base, some faculty members, and the ongoing challenge of maintaining academic traditions.

2. Materials and methods

The source material for this study comprises the student lists of Kharkiv University for the 1914–1915 (*Spisok studentov..., 1915*; *Dopolnitel'nyi spisok..., 1915*) and 1915–1916 (*Spisok studentov..., 1916*) academic years. These are administrative and accounting documents that record student data by faculty, specifically containing information regarding social background. The primary advantage of such sources is their standardized format. While the military-historical context is crucial for explaining these changes, our quantitative data exclusively cover the 1914–1916 period. The student list of Kharkiv University for the 1916–1917 academic year is accessible (*Alfavitnyi spisok..., 1917*), but its format differs significantly from those of the 1914–1915 and 1915–1916 academic years used in our study. Unlike preceding years, the 1916–1917 alphabetical list records students primarily in alphabetical order with faculty abbreviations, lacking systematic indications of social origin. This omission makes it impossible to reconstruct the social structure of the student body using the methodological framework applied to the 1914–1916 materials. Consequently, the lists for the 1916–1917 academic year were excluded from the quantitative tables in this article and were not used to construct dynamic series. Their inclusion without methodological adjustment would have violated the principle of source comparability. Nevertheless, despite the absence of social origin data, the 1916–1917 alphabetical list allows for the reconstruction of the student body's size and faculty structure. This facilitates tracing the overall scale of the university and faculty proportions immediately preceding the revolutionary events of 1917.

The methodological foundation of this study is a combination of quantitative socio-historical analysis with institutional and source-study approaches, enabling the examination of the Kharkiv University student body as a historically determined social community formed within a specific administrative and regulatory framework. Quantitative analysis was conducted using a continuous counting method, covering the entire available student population for each academic year without employing sampling techniques. This approach minimizes the risk of statistical distortion and permits an accurate comparison of both university-wide indicators and faculty structures. To ensure data comparability, social categories were aggregated into distinct groups (nobles, burghers, peasants, and other estates) following the internal logic of the source.

The analytical procedure entailed several successive levels. First, the social composition of the university as a whole was reconstructed for each academic year, allowing us to record the general proportions and dynamics between 1914–1915 and 1915–1916. Second, a structural analysis was conducted wherein each faculty was treated as a distinct social and functional unit with its own recruitment logic and professional orientation. This approach highlighted the asymmetrical nature of social change, avoiding oversimplification of the university student body. The qualitative interpretation of quantitative data was performed within the framework of the institutional approach, which views the university as a system characterized by internal hierarchy, traditions, and adaptive mechanisms. In this context, faculties are interpreted not merely as educational divisions but as structural segments of the university fulfilling different social functions. This perspective links shifts in the social composition of the student body to the specificities of professional training, the demand for specialists, and broader transformations within imperial society under wartime conditions.

Special attention is given to the principle of methodological limitation. The study deliberately adheres to the informational constraints of the utilized sources: the gender dimension is noted solely based on the presence or absence of women in the student lists, without attempting to extrapolate these findings to non-university forms of women's education. Social mobility is interpreted as a structural opportunity rather than an individual trajectory. This stance ensures consistency among the research questions, the source base, and the resulting conclusions. Consequently, the selected methodology successfully integrates precise quantitative source analysis with a historically accurate interpretation of the institutional context, enabling the reconstruction of the socio-structural dynamics of Kharkiv University students during the 1914–1916 academic years.

3. Discussion

The study of university students in the Russian Empire encompasses several established research

areas. The first involves the history of the student movement and political activism. In these works, social composition is often relegated to background context and rarely serves as a primary subject of analysis. The second area is the social history of education, wherein students are examined as integral components of state and societal modernization processes, the formation of the intelligentsia, professional groups, mobility channels, and the broader intellectual environment. Various scholarly studies outline the general background of social transformations, specifically in education, emphasizing the growing role of urban estates, the gradual erosion of estate boundaries in career practices, and the expansion of education as a valuable resource. Against this backdrop, universities gradually evolved beyond the "noble corporation" model, although the pace of this transition varied across regions and institutions.

A distinct body of scholarly literature focuses on the university as an institution, examining its relations with the government, the professorial corporation, its internal structure, and the function of faculties. This literature underscores the concept that the university was not homogeneous; its faculties performed distinct social functions. Medical education was generally viewed as highly "practical"; legal education served as a pathway to the civil service and elevated social status; while historical and philological studies provided a space for cultivating cultural capital.

Our previous publications establish a consistent research trajectory centered on the university as an institution during the late imperial era, exploring its governance mechanisms, regulatory frameworks, the role of administrative positions in implementing state educational policy, and interactions with the academic corporation (Lebid, Shevchenko, 2021). A logical extension of this institutional perspective was a series of studies focusing on the rectorate as a pivotal element of university administration in the Russian Empire during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In a specific study on Kharkiv University, the rectorate is analyzed as an "indicator" of the interplay among bureaucratic control, internal autonomy, and the corporate practices of a classical university (Lebid, 2022a). Concurrently with this institutional focus, we investigated the socio-structural dynamics of the student body, albeit within a different chronological timeframe. Notably, in an article analyzing the social composition of Kharkiv Imperial University students during the second half of the nineteenth century, we tested an approach utilizing accounting sources and proposed a model for the quantitative reconstruction of the student body's social profile (Lebid, 2022b). In the context of the previous institutional series, we analyzed several university centers in Ukraine (Kharkiv, Kyiv, Odesa), establishing a comparative interpretive horizon. The present study, which focuses on Kharkiv University from 1914 to 1916, lays the empirical foundation for future comparisons of student social composition across Ukrainian universities. This will ultimately facilitate the integration of managerial and social dimensions into a comprehensive comparative study.

4. Results

Kharkiv University possesses a rich institutional history. In modern historiography concerning the social history of higher education in the Russian Empire during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a consensus has emerged suggesting that universities gradually shed their character as exclusive noble corporations, transforming into socially mixed institutions. This process is typically linked to urbanization, the development of a professional economy, and the heightened educational expectations of urban estates (Ivanov, 1999; Ivanov, 2023; Mironov, 2003). Conversely, some scholars view World War I as a critical turning point capable of drastically altering the social composition of students through military mobilization, personnel losses, and shifts in educational policy. The analyzed data from Kharkiv University help clarify the relationship between these two interpretations.

The data for the 1914–1915 academic year (Table 1) indicate that at the onset of the war, the university already possessed a socially mixed structure: burghers constituted the largest group, the nobility maintained a significant but non-dominant position, and the peasant component was clearly evident. This indicates that the departure from a purely noble-centric model began well before the conflict and cannot be attributed solely to the war. Nevertheless, a comparison between 1914–1915 and 1915–1916 (Tables 2-3) reveals distinct transformations: a decline in the share of the nobility and a concurrent rise in the peasant component, alongside the stable dominance of burghers. Therefore, the war did not forge a new social model but rather accelerated and exacerbated pre-existing trends. Empirical analysis confirms that while the war's impact was significant, it was not decisive.

Institutional studies of universities consistently emphasize that faculties function not merely as administrative units but execute diverse social roles, attracting distinct student demographics (Andreev, 2009). Yet, in broader generalizations, this premise often remains theoretical rather than empirically validated. An examination of Kharkiv University's faculties (Tables 4-6) addresses this gap. In the 1914–1915 academic year (Table 4), an internal social hierarchy is readily apparent. The Faculty of History and Philology emerged as the most elite. Here, the proportion of nobles significantly exceeded the university average, while the peasant component remained minimal. This configuration aligns with the interpretation of humanities education as an arena for accumulating cultural and symbolic capital, wherein social selectivity endures even amidst broader transformations. Conversely, the Faculty of Medicine exhibited the greatest social openness, even in the pre-war period. This faculty boasted the highest share of peasants among all disciplines. This finding supports the widespread understanding of medical education as a primary conduit

for professionalization and vertical mobility. The Faculty of Law occupied a transitional space: it retained a substantial noble presence but was dominated by students of burgher origin oriented toward state and legal careers. The Faculty of Physics and Mathematics displayed a highly "balanced" profile, merging elements of elitism with relative openness.

The war years of 1915–1916 did not dismantle this faculty hierarchy but rendered it more dynamic (Tables 5-6). The most pronounced shifts occurred within the Faculty of Medicine, where the influx of students of peasant origin peaked, while the share of nobility plummeted to the lowest level across all faculties. This trend solidifies medicine's role as the primary driver of the university's social openness during wartime, substantiating institutional hypotheses with quantitative evidence. The Faculty of Law experienced the most significant reduction in its noble component, potentially reflecting altered career strategies among privileged groups. Concurrently, the sustained dominance of burghers underscores the stability of this faculty's social function. The Faculty of Physics and Mathematics exhibited the slowest rate of change, highlighting the inherent inertia of the academic and scientific sector. Despite a slight decrease in its noble cohort, the Faculty of History and Philology remained the most elite, illustrating the humanities segment's resilience to external shocks. Thus, the military context did not eliminate inter-faculty distinctions; rather, it amplified them. These dynamic highlights the asymmetrical nature of social change within the university.

A distinct historiographical focus addresses women's education and the gender boundaries inherent in the university system. Researchers have convincingly demonstrated that even as access to education expanded, classical universities remained exclusively male corporations, forcing women's higher education to develop within alternative institutional frameworks. The examined records from Kharkiv University for 1914–1916 empirically substantiate this thesis: there are no women documented in the student lists. Consequently, the university's modernization proved highly selective: the relaxation of estate-based barriers coincided with the rigid enforcement of normative gender restrictions.

In summary, Kharkiv University during the 1914–1916 academic years exemplifies an institution undergoing selective modernization. The war accelerated ongoing social shifts but failed to dismantle the internal faculty hierarchy or alter the foundational regulatory framework governing educational access. Social openness was predominantly localized in applied disciplines, whereas the humanities retained heightened selectivity, and gender boundaries remained wholly unchanged.

Table 1. Social composition of students at Kharkiv University in 1914–1915 ([Spisok studentov..., 1915](#); [Dopolnitel'nyi spisok..., 1915](#))

Social group	%
Nobles	32.0
Burghers	37.2
Peasants	19.2
Other estates	11.6

Table 1 shows a fairly balanced, but definitely "urban" profile of the student body. The largest share is made up of burghers, which is logical for a university located in a large city and regional center. The nobility takes the second position and remains a highly noticeable component. At the same time, almost one-fifth of the students come from peasant backgrounds, which is a crucial indicator that the university was not a closed club of privilege.

Table 2. Social composition of students at Kharkiv University in 1915–1916 ([Spisok studentov..., 1916](#))

Social group	%
Nobles	28.3
Burghers	38.2
Peasants	21.5
Other estates	12.0

In 1915–1916, the total number of students decreases, but the format of the changes is more significant. The share of nobles decreases by almost 4 %, while the share of peasants increases. The burghers not only retain first place but also strengthen their position. This demonstrates the "pulling up" of non-privileged groups within the university structure against the backdrop of military mobilization and societal restructuring. These changes should not be attributed to the war alone. Rather, it accelerates existing trends. The decline in the share of nobles may reflect both a mobilization factor and a shift in educational strategies within a privileged environment. Concurrently, the growth of the peasant component reveals the increased attractiveness of vocational education for broader social groups.

Table 3. Dynamics of the social composition of students (1914–1915, 1915–1916)

Social group	1914–1915, %	1915–1916, %	Change
Nobles	32.0	28.3	-3.7
Burghers	37.2	38.2	+1.0
Peasants	19.2	21.5	+2.3
Other estates	11.6	12.0	+0.4

Table 3 summarizes the main point: the university becomes slightly more socially open, but the changes are not revolutionary. The burghers remain the "nucleus"; the decline of the nobility and the growth of the peasantry form the primary vector. For a historian, it is crucial not to exaggerate the scale: we do not observe a breakdown, but a shift in the weight of components within an already mixed composition.

Table 4. Social composition of students by faculty in the 1914–1915 academic year ([Spisok studentov..., 1915](#); [Dopolnitel'nyi spisok..., 1915](#))

Faculty	Nobles, %	Burghers, %	Peasants, %	Other, %
Faculty of Law	34.1	37.3	17.4	11.2
Faculty of Medicine	22.1	40.4	25.1	12.4
Faculty of Physics and Mathematics	31.6	35.6	20.3	12.5
Faculty of History and Philology	44.6	33.8	11.9	9.7

Table 4 shows that the "social portrait" of the university consists of different faculty models. The Faculty of History and Philology is the most elitist. Almost half of the enrolled students are of noble origin, and the share of peasants is the lowest. This perfectly aligns with the role of humanities education as a space of cultural capital and symbolic status. The Faculty of Medicine, conversely, demonstrates the greatest social openness. The share of students from rural backgrounds exceeds a quarter. The Faculty of Law serves as a "compromise" – featuring a noticeable presence of nobles but dominated by burghers. The Faculty of Physics and Mathematics mirrors the Faculty of Law but maintains a slightly higher peasant component and a lower share of "others," which may indicate a distinct enrollment configuration and different educational motivations.

Table 5. Social composition of students by faculty in the 1915–1916 academic year ([Spisok studentov..., 1916](#))

Faculty	Nobles, %	Burghers, %	Peasants, %	Other, %
Faculty of Law	28.8	38.7	19.3	13.2
Faculty of Medicine	19.3	39.6	29.4	11.7
Faculty of Physics and Mathematics	29.8	37.6	21.2	11.4
Faculty of History and Philology	40.5	35.4	12.9	11.2

In 1915–1916, the general faculty hierarchy was preserved, but an important detail emerged: the most significant changes occurred where practical demand existed. The Faculty of Medicine increased the representation of students of peasant origin to almost one-third, while the share of nobles fell below 20 %. This reflects enhanced mobility within the applied segment. At the Faculty of Law, the decline in the share of the nobility is more pronounced than at the Faculty of Physics and Mathematics. Concurrently, the burghers retain their dominance, supporting the thesis that legal education was the primary resource for urban estates seeking careers in the legal and administrative spheres. The Faculty of History and Philology remained the most elite even in wartime, highlighting the institutional inertia of the humanities segment.

Table 6. Changes in the share of nobles and peasants by faculty (1914–1915, 1915–1916)

Faculty	Δ nobles	Δ peasants
Faculty of Law	-5.3	+1.9
Faculty of Medicine	-2.8	+4.3
Faculty of Physics and Mathematics	-1.8	+0.9
Faculty of History and Philology	-4.1	+1.0

As shown, the largest increase in the number of students from rural areas occurred at the Faculty of Medicine. This provides crucial evidence that the social openness of the university was not uniform but

possessed local peculiarities. The most significant drop in the share of the nobility is recorded at the Faculty of Law, alongside a noticeable decline at the Faculty of History and Philology. The Faculty of Physics and Mathematics exhibits the slowest rate of change.

In terms of gender, the student lists for the 1914–1915 and 1915–1916 academic years record the absolute absence of women among classical university students, which is inherently an indicator of the institutional limits on higher education access during the late imperial period. The social "openness" of the university during the war was highly selective. The relaxation of estate-based barriers in certain segments coexisted with the preservation of strict normative and practical restrictions for women. Their enduring exclusion demonstrates the sustainability of the university's corporate model.

The findings confirm the general conclusion that universities gradually moved beyond the confines of the nobility, and urban estates became the primary source of students. At the same time, the sources from Kharkiv University allow us to observe the transformation mechanisms more precisely. The primary contribution of the faculty-level approach is its demonstration of divergent trajectories. Medicine functioned as a tangible channel for vertical mobility – the growth of the peasantry is the largest here, and the share of the nobility is the lowest across all faculties. The humanities segment (the Faculty of History and Philology) demonstrates inertia, remaining the most elitist of all faculties during wartime. The Faculty of Law operated as an adaptive faculty – rapidly losing its noble cohort but maintaining strong burgher representation. The Faculty of Physics and Mathematics changed slowly, which can be attributed to both the specifics of educational selection and the rigorously academic nature of the specialty.

5. Conclusion

At the outbreak of World War I (the 1914–1915 academic year), the student body of Kharkiv University already exhibited a mixed social structure characterized by the dominance of burghers, a substantial share of nobility, and a noticeable peasant component. During the 1915–1916 academic year, specific shifts occurred: the proportion of nobles decreased, the share of peasants increased, and the burghers retained their core status. The faculties also varied in their social functions: the Faculty of Medicine was the most open, the Faculty of History and Philology remained conservative regarding noble representation, the Faculty of Law proved adaptive, and the Faculty of Physics and Mathematics maintained its conservative academic model. Ultimately, World War I served as a catalyst that unevenly intensified pre-existing trends and transformations, driving the asymmetrical modernization of the university environment between 1914 and 1916.

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