

# On the history of the creation and activities of the Department of Social Hygiene in the Faculty of Medicine at the First Moscow State University

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## Abstract

This article explores the key features of the establishment of the Department of Social Hygiene in the Faculty of Medicine at the First Moscow State University in February 1922. Despite the challenging circumstances, Nikolai Semashko, the department's first professor, managed, in a short space of time, to put together teaching and research staff, to develop, with his colleagues' help, the necessary teaching and curricular materials, to establish the role of social hygiene among other preventive and clinical disciplines, and to launch classes for students at the First and Second Moscow State Universities and the Moscow Institute of Medicine. From 1922 to 1930, when the department was part of the Faculty of Medicine at the First Moscow State University, its staff carried out applied research into the impact of social factors on the health of various population groups, involved students in the department's research, and helped to produce scientific and curricular literature. In 1930, the department became part of the First Moscow Institute of Medicine, and its staff continued their teaching, curricular and research activities within the structure of that establishment.

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## Keywords

history of public health, Russian educational establishments, social hygiene, N.A. Semashko, Faculty of Medicine, First Moscow State University

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“The owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the onset of dusk,” starts Semashko's article “Social hygiene, its nature, method and importance”. This quotation from Hegel, believed Semashko, illustrated one of the truths of sociology, which he defined as follows: “The understanding of social phenomena begins only when these phenomena develop” (Semashko 1922). Semashko used material from this article in his lectures in the Department of Social Hygiene.

The history of Russia's first department of social hygiene, which has borne the name of its

founder and first professor, Nikolai Semashko,<sup>1</sup> since 2015, can be divided into several stages. The most challenging of these was undoubtedly the first: from its foundation in 1922 to 1930, when the department was established within the Faculty of Medicine at the First Moscow State University (Gorelova and Kasimovskaia 2015). In 1930, another event took place that inevitably affected

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the department's subsequent activities: Semashko<sup>2</sup> was relieved of his position as People's Commissar of Public Health (Arsentyev and Reshetnikov 2017).

The establishment of a department of social hygiene in Russia was linked to factors that changed the views of the medical community on the role of prevention in a doctor's work, primarily the increase in the urban population since the end of the nineteenth century, as well as the harsh working and living conditions for factory and mill workers, which made it easier for socially significant diseases to spread. That social factors have a huge influence on public health was observed by prominent hygienists of the time: "Published in 1872, the hygiene course of Doctor Erisman (who was not yet a professor then) reflects both an experimental direction, as well as social trends," commented Alexei Sysin. "In his preface, he says: 'The immediate goal of hygiene is to study the influence of the artificial environment in which a person lives – a consequence of their social status.'" (Sysin 1922). In 1910, the Eleventh Pirogov Congress of Physicians, like the Seventh, in Kazan in 1899, reviewed aspects of social medicine: "It was acknowledged that a huge majority of physicians had to work in public organisations, while treatment and public healthcare for the population was becoming increasingly socialised as public life developed, so 'every doctor needs knowledge of social medicine, as a separate discipline'" (Molkov 1923a). It should be said that these views were influenced by the experience of teaching social hygiene at foreign universities (Semashko 1922, Sysin 1922).

These circumstances facilitated the emergence of Russia's first departments of social medicine and public health (from 1908, they began opening, though not at higher education institution medical faculties), but this did not necessarily mean that independent departments of hygiene would be established at the country's universities (Sysin 1922, Molkov 1923a).

On 3 October 1921, the scientific and technical section of the State Academic Council of the Chief Administration for Vocational Training (Glavprofobr) made the decision to establish a department of social hygiene in the Faculty of

Medicine at the First Moscow State University (Sysin 1922, Molkov 1923b). It is quite possible that this higher education institution was chosen because private lecture courses were taught there by People's Commissar of Public Health Nikolai Semashko ("On the principles of the organisation of Soviet medicine") and his deputy Zinovy Solovyov ("On the social roots of tuberculosis and social pathology in general") (Semashko 1947).

The head of the new department had to recruit staff for it and, with the new employees, draw up a programme, prepare guides for the students, divide up its sphere of activity with the Department of Experimental Hygiene, and so on (Molkov 1923b). All this was done in challenging conditions (poverty, the low level of culture of a significant portion of the population, the unsatisfactory state of public health, the shortage of specialists in social hygiene, and so on). These difficulties were exacerbated by the vast size of the country, the diversity of its climate, geography, ethnic make-up and economy, and the specific features of how its population lived, "from (almost) a subsistence economy to (almost) fully established commune" (Molkov 1929).

The Department of Social Hygiene was established at a challenging time for the university, as can be seen from documents in the Central State Archives of the City of Moscow (TsGA Moskv). For example, one document, dated 8 November 1922, discusses the university's difficult financial position.<sup>3</sup> The report for 1922 contains material on the work of a famine relief commission. Based on it, the decision was made to donate three percent of the pay received by the university's professors and teachers to the famine victims each month "from 1 July 1922 for as long as necessary".<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, the new department met with apprehension or even hostility from staff at clinical departments, since most clinicians at the time did not share the ideas of prevention. This circumstance left its mark not only on the educational programme, but also on the research performed by staff at the Department of Social Hygiene (Semashko 1947).

Despite numerous difficulties, the department was quickly fully staffed. Nikolai Semashko, who had already been working at the First Moscow

<sup>2</sup> Semashko headed the Department of Social Hygiene for 27 years (until his death in 1949).

<sup>3</sup> TsGA Moskv. F. 1609. Op. 1. D. 597. L. 1.

<sup>4</sup> TsGA Moskv. F. 1609. Op. 1. D. 622. L. 3.

State University since 1920, was appointed as its professor, Alfred Molkov and Alexei Sysin (from 9 February 1922) and Sergei Kaplun (from 2 March 1922) as assistants, and L.N. Shcheglova (from 9 February 1922; she had already been working at the Institute of Hygiene from 12 April 1921) and Lev Syrkin (from 16 March 1922) as researchers.<sup>5</sup> In addition to the full-time staff, M.Ya. Mirsky was hired as a researcher at the department (from 1 August 1923).<sup>6</sup> That the department was fully staffed can be seen from Report 3851 of the Management Board of the First Moscow State University to Glavprofobr, dated 26 June 1923, which states that “together with representatives of the Governorate Committee of Public Education and the Scientific Workers Section, the following staffing numbers have been established for the Department of Social Hygiene in the Faculty of Medicine: 1 professor; 3 teachers; 2 researchers”.<sup>7</sup>

In one of his later articles, Semashko writes that “a department of social hygiene appeared in the USSR for the first time in February 1922 (the first lecture took place on 20 February) in the Faculty of Medicine at the First Moscow State University” (Semashko 1947). However, the official date of the establishment of Russia’s first department of social hygiene remains a subject of debate. For example, some authors link its foundation with a decision by the scientific and technical section of the State Academic Council of Glavprofobr on 3 October 1921 (Serenko 1972). However, at an expanded meeting of a department conference on 16 March 1923, Molkov stated, in a report on the department’s activities in its first year, which has been preserved, that the Department of Social Hygiene in the Faculty of Medicine at the First Moscow State University “began its activities from March 1922 delivering lectures and setting up research administration work” (Molkov 1923b). The curriculum for the RSFSR Faculty of Medicine, approved by the State Academic Council on 27 September 1922, states: “A course in social hygiene will be introduced in the Department of General Hygiene or as a separate department.” The document also established that one of the state examinations would

be in social hygiene.<sup>8</sup> Such inconsistencies may be explained by the fact that not enough attention was paid to document storage in the conditions at the time. For example, there is no evidence that the Department of Social Hygiene in the Faculty of Medicine at the Second Moscow State University was established in the 1923/1924 academic year, even though this date is given in every encyclopedia and reference work (Polunina 2014).

One of the objectives facing the Department of Social Hygiene established in the Faculty of Medicine at the First Moscow State University in 1922 was to train physicians at three higher education institutions in Moscow the First and Second Moscow State Universities, and the Moscow Institute of Medicine. This meant an increased teaching load for its relatively small number of academic staff and to difficulties with organising the education process and with paperwork (in particular with storing documents and archive materials). Today, almost no one questions the origins of training in social hygiene in the medical faculties at the First and Second Moscow State Universities, which were reorganised in 1930 into the First Moscow Institute of Medicine (Gorelova 2015) and the Second Moscow Institute of Medicine (Polunina 2014) respectively. For a long time, researchers wondered about the fate of the Moscow Institute of Medicine. This was because there were three Third Moscow Institutes of Medicine in this period. One was Ilya Kovarsky’s school of dentistry opened in Moscow in 1892, which, as a result of the merger of several dental institutions, was reorganised into a dental research centre, the House of Soviet Dentistry, in 1920, and became the State Institute of Dentistry in 1922. This educational establishment, having undergone multiple changes, began to be unofficially called the “Third Institute of Medicine”. Officially, however, the name of the Third Moscow Institute of Medicine was borne by another higher education institution, established in 1931. This brought together institutions in Moscow’s Sokolnichesky District, which acted as both treatment and prevention institutions and educational training centres. Later, they were reorganised into the Third and Fourth Moscow Institutes of Medicine. In 1943, after returning from evacuation,

<sup>5</sup> TsGA Moskv. F. 1609. Op. 1. D. 694. L. 59.

<sup>6</sup> TsGA Moskv. F. 1609. Op. 1. D. 694. L. 64.

<sup>7</sup> TsGA Moskv. F. 1609. Op. 1. D. 701. L. 8.

<sup>8</sup> TsGA Moskv. F. 1609. Op. 1. D. 594. L. 2.

these institutes merged to form the Moscow Institute of Medicine, under the RSFSR Ministry of Health. This moved to Ryazan in 1950. However, the early history of the teaching of social hygiene at the Moscow Institute of Medicine is linked to the opening of the State Higher School of Medicine in Moscow in 1919, which focused on the accelerated training of physicians from among former medical attendants (military feldshers), who were taught at the First Red Army Communist Hospital in Lefortovo. In 1923, this school was renamed the Moscow Institute of Medicine, which Muscovites often called the “Third Medical Institute”. In 1924, it became part of the Faculty of Medicine at the Second Moscow State University (Borodulin et al. 2014).

To regulate the forthcoming work, staff at the Department of Social Hygiene drew up provisions covering the three main areas of the department’s activities: teaching, research administration, and research. Bearing in mind the department’s goal of training students at three higher education institutions at once, lectures were provided at Devichye Pole for fourth-year students at the First Moscow State University and fifth-year students at the Second Moscow State University simultaneously in the spring semester of 1922. These lectures were regarded as experimental by the department’s teachers: from the next academic year, they planned to start work with the same First Moscow State University students, now in the fifth year. After the spring semester, it became clear that it would not be possible to provide lectures at Devichye Pole for students from the Moscow Institute of Medicine, and the decision was made to run a course on social hygiene for them at Lefortovo in the 1922/1923 academic year. To this end, the department hired assistant I.G. Gelman and researcher O.A. Rikman. Subsequently, classes with students from the Faculty of Medicine at the Second Moscow State University taking Professor Semashko’s core introductory course took place in one of the clinical classrooms on Kaluzhskaya Street (Molkov 1923b).

The first lecture course was split by topics between the professors and assistants. The introductory part, social diseases and mother and infant welfare were taught by the department’s professor, Nikolai Semashko, occupational health and safety by department assistant Sergei Kaplun, the state of public health in the country and the

problem of collective living (the housing question) by department assistant Alexei Sysin (with some of the teaching for the Moscow Institute of Medicine being done by department assistant I.G. Gelman), and public health education, and social problems of nutrition by department assistant Alfred Molkov. There were 22 lectures in the spring semester of 1922, 34 in the autumn semester of 1922, 30 in the first two months of 1923, making 86 in total in the 1922/1923 academic year. In its first year, the Department of Social Hygiene was unable to deliver the full planned lecture course before the examination period, which began in May 1923. That same year, the department’s staff also gave lectures on social hygiene and as part of courses organised for public health doctors by the People’s Commissariat of Health, and in April–May for military doctors as part of courses for physical training instructors under the Chief Medical Board of Health (Molkov 1923b).

From the department’s first year, its staff, in addition to delivering lectures, actively involved students in practical classes, which took the form of one-off excursions to tuberculosis and venereal disease clinics, an institute of physical training, an institute of medical education, an exhibition on healthcare, and factories. The student groups were accompanied on these excursions by a teacher (“a comprehensive explainer”) and had the chance to do optional written work afterwards. There were 25 such excursions in all during the department’s first year, and more than 800 students took part. Apart from the lectures and practical classes, the students took part in discussion groups on themes linked to the examination test tasks. This method of teaching made it possible not only to check how well the students understood the teaching material, but also to systematise the knowledge gained in the classes (Molkov 1923b).

The 1923/1924 academic year saw the introduction of classes on statistics and anthropometry, a visit to an exhibition on healthcare, and a system involving a preliminary test or discussion group with compulsory submission of summary essays. The two-hour practical classes during the academic year in the biometrics and statistics offices at the State Institute of Social Hygiene were attended by students in groups of 25. After an excursion, the students formed groups of five and prepared a summary essay on one of the suggested

topics (public health statistics, tuberculosis, venereal diseases, alcoholism, mother, infant and child welfare, public health education and social problems of nutrition). The preliminary tests or discussion groups were held in groups of 50. The teachers checked the summary essays in advance and discussed them in seminar classes (Batkis 1924). In subsequent years, seminars became the main form of teaching on social hygiene, while the lectures provided general information (the students at them were presented with basic conclusions and findings) (Batkis 1924, Semashko 1954).

A report from the Faculty of Medicine at the First Moscow State University for the 1926/1927 academy year states that in spring 1926 the State Academic Council approved a new curriculum with new subjects – hygiene in education, occupational hygiene, statistics, anthropometry, and so on. There were fewer lecture hours and more practical classes, including on medical check-ups, organised by the general outpatient clinic and staff from the Department of Social Hygiene.<sup>9</sup> As well as the main course in its core discipline for the fifth year, the Department of Social Hygiene was tasked with holding third-year classes on statistics and anthropometry, but, for a number of organisational and technical reasons, only statistics was taught, with the anthropometry course being provided for the fourth year by staff from the Department of Hygiene in Education.<sup>10</sup>

Russia's first teaching programme for a social hygiene course was developed in 1922 by staff from the Department of Social Hygiene in the Faculty of Medicine at the First Moscow State University and included the following sections: definition of the concept of social hygiene as a research discipline and teaching subject; disease as a social phenomenon, and the historical development of views on physical illness; statistics as a method of studying the state of public health; national calamities (wars, famine, epidemics, etc.) and their impact on the state of public health; the state of public health in Russia through its history; problems of collective living in terms of social hygiene; the housing question in social and public health terms; problems of public nutrition; social diseases; social challenges in mother, infant and child

welfare; occupational health and safety; the social and preventive goals of curative medicine; public health management and legislation; public health education as the basis for social hygiene measures; eugenics as a goal of treatment and public health measures (Programma... 1922). Later, in 1924, 1925 and 1928, programmes were developed with the participation of representatives of social hygiene departments at other higher education institutions.

Gradually, views on social hygiene as a teaching subject and research discipline changed, and this was reflected in changes in the themes of the classes. For example, when the First Moscow Institute of Medicine was established in 1930, a group from the Department of Social Hygiene taught students according to a programme including the following sections: the concept of social hygiene, its method and goals; the relationship between biological and social factors; issues of resettlement and collective living; social insurance; the reorganisation of daily life in terms of social hygiene; social abnormalities; healthcare organisation in industrial centres and at new housing developments; healthcare organisation in the socialist sector of agriculture (Semashko 1954).

From the outset, the teaching staff at the Department of Social Hygiene paid considerable attention to producing and publishing teaching and curricular literature. As early as 1922 (the department's first year), Molkov's lecture guide "Social problems of nutrition", Kaplun's book *Occupational Health and Safety and the Authorities Responsible* and Semashko's popular pamphlet "The science of public health" were published. In 1923, Kaplun organised the translation into Russian of the *Kompendium der sozialen Hygiene* ("Compendium of Social Hygiene") by German professor Benno Chajes, interlineary notes and additions to it were produced with the help of L.N. Shcheglova and Lev Syrkin, researchers in the department (Hayes 1923). That same year, Part 1 of Kaplun's *Work and Health* was published.

In addition, from 1922 the Department of Social Hygiene organised the publication of a digest called "Social Hygiene", the main goals of which were to address the acute shortage of literature in Russian on aspects of social hygiene, and to involve external employees in joint activity and the association of the social hygiene departments at all the republic's universities. Some of the articles

<sup>9</sup> TsGA Moskv. F. 1609. Op. 1. D. 1021. L. 4.

<sup>10</sup> TsGA Moskv. F. 1609. Op. 1. D. 1021. L. 47.

in the first digest were course lectures by department staff, including Semashko (“Social hygiene, its nature, method and importance”) (Molkov 1923b). The title pages of the first (1922) and second (1923) editions included the words “A digest published periodically under the editorship of the department of social hygiene of the Moscow State Universities”. The 1924 and later editions (published until 1930) of the digest omitted this, evidently because the Department of Social Hygiene in the Faculty of Medicine at the First Moscow State University stopped offering classes for students from other higher education institutions from 1924. As an aid to preparing for the classes, the department’s staff recommended Volume 1 of a guide to social hygiene published in 1927 under the supervision of Alfred Molkov, with an introductory article by Semashko, as well as topical articles from the Soviet Union’s Great Medical Encyclopaedia.<sup>11</sup>

In terms of research administration, the staff of the Department of Social Hygiene played an active role in raising awareness of practical aspects of healthcare, and developing issues of social hygiene, establishing a school of researchers, setting up a museum and a library, developing programmes and curricula, and putting together guides, bibliographic indices and similar publications (Molkov 1923b). Semashko believed that social hygiene needed to be a kind of “elementary political science” in the Faculty of Medicine, since its scope primarily included studying the position of the working masses, which made it the “standard” science for developing measures to improve their situation (Semashko 1922), while the Department of Social Hygiene needed to inspire a love of national healthcare in students (Gorfin 1947).

Initially, the staff of the Department of Social Hygiene had to tackle various organisational objectives, but these were gradually taken over by other entities. By 1924, interest in clinical practice in terms of social aetiology had increased significantly, and a clinic for occupational and social diseases was opened at the department. This was a small in-patient unit with specially selected patients whose case histories clearly illustrated the impact of social and occupational factors on the

development of a particular illness. Along with an outpatient centre, then headed by Professor Dmitry Rossysky, the clinic provided a check-up service for employees of a spool factory in Moscow’s Zamoskvoretsky District. In 1926, a department of occupational hygiene, headed by Sergei Kaplun and, a department of hygiene in education, headed by Alfred Molkov were spun off from the Department of Social Hygiene (Semashko 1947, Molkov 1929, Semashko 1954, Pashintsev 1927). With experienced specialists being moved to the new departments, P.A. Kuvshinnikov and D.I. Deigman were engaged as assistants to their positions.<sup>12</sup>

These changes made it possible to define more clearly the scope of the issues within the remit of the department’s staff. A number of meetings were held, at which the department’s goals and objectives were explained and its development prospects clarified. It was also suggested that public debates on social hygiene topics be held with colleagues from other departments, which would help to generate interest in aspects of social aetiology, prevention and therapy, and to incorporate them more extensively into the system of clinical teaching. However, the changes did not come about without difficulty (Semashko 1954).

In tackling its research organisation goals, the Department of Social Hygiene was greatly helped by the State Museum of Social Hygiene, which was reorganised in 1923 into the State Institute of Social Hygiene, headed by Alfred Molkov, one of the department’s assistants (Kyzybaeva 2013). This cooperation made it possible to combine related disciplines and, consequently, related departments. Operating regularly at the institute was the “Bureau of Prevention Departments”, which developed and approved research and methodological matters, thereby helping staff in the Department of Social Hygiene to develop approaches to teaching the discipline. The establishment of a Social Hygiene Society at the institute helped ideas relating to social hygiene to spread more quickly among physicians (Semashko 1947).

A significant part of the activities of the staff of the Department of Social Hygiene was research work that was of great importance in terms of social hygiene and had a practical dimension. For

<sup>11</sup> For more details on this, see (Semashko 1954).

<sup>12</sup> TsGA Moskv. F. 1609. Op. 1. D. 1021. L. 49.

example, one of the topics they worked on (“The Second Five-Year Healthcare Plan in Moscow’s Frunzensky District”) was aimed at finding ways for the Five-Year Healthcare Plan to be implemented on strictly scientific grounds, which enabled close cooperation between the staff of the Department of Social Hygiene and other groups of educational workers (Semashko 1954). Subsequently, the main research projects carried out in the department were associated with the study of problems such as alcoholism, sexually transmitted infections, theoretical demography, medical screening for female mill workers, the state of public health for small towns and rural residents, and so on.<sup>13</sup>

Students as well as teachers were involved in the performance of research in the Department of Social Hygiene. To this end, a student science club was set up. In the department’s early years, this included students from the First and Second Moscow State Universities and the Moscow Institute of Medicine. For example, 110 people attended in 1922. Outside classroom time, the club’s members engaged in independent work: they studied the impact of living conditions on people’s health, identified the reasons for the spread of social diseases, and attempted to identify measures to prevent them, analysed the effectiveness of measures to improve the health of the young (the welfare of mothers, infants, school-age children and youths), and established the need to develop areas such as occupational health and safety at factories and mills, and so on (Pashintsev 1923). The club was open to all, but its research was periodically checked so as to identify members not contributing (Pashintsev 1925). In the 1926/1927 academic year, 17 people took part in the work of the student science club on social hygiene on a regular basis.<sup>14</sup>

At an official function on 26 March 1927 celebrating the first five years of the Department of Social Hygiene in the Faculty of Medicine at the First Moscow State University, its staff were highly praised: “In the heart of the oldest Russian university, the Department of Social Hygiene began its work with a shortage of traditions and experience, while facing a host of organisational challenges. There were sceptics who questioned

its need. Having overcome not a few obstacles and having absorbed everything valuable from the old, traditional academic world, while not overproud of its new beginnings, or stubbornly insisting on its own ideas, the department has set out on the right path. As the youngest of the academic departments, it has come to occupy a central place among them, both thanks to the goals set for it and thanks to the energy of its leaders” (Pashintsev 1927). In his address, the rector of the First Moscow State University, Professor Andrei Vyshinsky, said: “The academic world wants to see its ideological leader in the Department of Social Hygiene. Medicine should be proud of this discipline, without which humanity was lost in the dark for a long time” (Pashintsev 1927).

The traditions introduced by Semashko in the Department of Social Hygiene in the Faculty of Medicine at the First Moscow State University are carefully preserved even today: the N.A. Semashko Department of Public Health and Healthcare is one of the leading departments at the F.F. Erisman Institute of Public Health at the Sechenov University. Since 2016, the department’s academic staff have been implementing an innovative student training project in a school of expertise called the “Healthcare leaders factory” (Reshetnikov, Tregubov, Pereverzina 2019). The department’s higher education programmes train not only undergraduates, but also doctoral students, masters students and medical residents. The student science club continues its active work in public health and healthcare. As well as a serious theoretical background in the discipline they teach, the leading professors in the N.A. Semashko Department of Public Health and Healthcare have extensive practical experience of working at various healthcare organisations, and take part in the activities of professional associations, dissertation panels, the editorial boards of various scientific journals, and so on.

To sum up, the Department of Social Hygiene was established in the Faculty of Medicine at the First Moscow State University in challenging socio-political conditions. Despite this, Semashko and his colleagues managed, in a short space of time, to establish the department’s role among other preventive and clinical teaching bodies, develop curricula and training programmes, start the planned social hygiene classes with students at the First and Second Moscow State Universities and

<sup>13</sup> TsGA Moskvyy. F. 1609. Op. 1. D. 1021. L. 49.

<sup>14</sup> TsGA Moskvyy. F. 1609. Op. 1. D. 1021. L. 53.

the Moscow Institute of Medicine, prepare the necessary curricular literature, involve academic staff in research, and organise the work of a student science club. The results achieved allowed

the Department of Social Hygiene to successfully incorporate into the First Moscow Institute of Medicine in 1930 and to continue its research and educational activities today.

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