Fire protection in the Russian empire in the second half of the 19th century: main contradictions and search for development pathways

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Abstract. This paper considers the peculiarities of legal regulation for three types of fire brigades in the 19th-century Russian Empire. It describes the formation of the fire protection service, one of the first public emergency response services. The authors reveal contradictions in the management system and legal status of fire brigades in Russia. They focus on the classification of fire brigades in the Russian Empire by dividing them into state police and public fire brigades. The paper also considers the public project of establishing a single centralized body of state fire protection management in the Russian Empire. To accomplish this, the archival materials of Count Sheremet’ev’s personal papers and the papers of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Empire are analyzed. The authors conclude that Russian state, though aware of the need for reform in fire protection, could not effectively implement it. The reform project prepared by Bogdanovich and Sheremet’ev was not implemented because of poor interaction between the state and public firefighting services of the country.

1. Introduction

Fire safety is an essential function of a modern state. Thus, a single administrative body in the field of fire safety is necessary for creating an effective model for preventing fires due to human and technogenic factors. This body should also manage a modern firefighting system and the mechanism for investigating the causes of fires. However, for much of Russia’s history, there was no state institution to serve this purpose. The history of state fire brigades in Russia is rather short: it has only been about 200 years that fires in Russia have been extinguished by professionals rather than by ordinary citizens.
2. Theoretical framework
Several famous Russian scientists analyzed the legal regulations surrounding Russian fire protection: Chekhov [1], Sheremet’ev [2], Borodin [3], Schablov, Vinogradov, and Bessonov [4], and others. Some aspects of fire protection history in Russia were considered at different times by Novichkova [5], Skipskiy [6], Abramov [7], and Nemchenko [8].

3. Statement of the problem
State fire protection in Russia starts in early 19th century, when in 1803-1804, the first state city fire brigades were established in St. Petersburg and Moscow. In 1818, fire brigades of the St. Petersburg style were developed by order of the supreme authority in other cities of the empire. All the norms related to the legal regulation of state fire brigade activity were codified in the early 1830s and became part of the Collection of Laws of the Russian Empire in the form of a Fire Charter. According to the norms of the Fire Charter, the state fire brigades served under the police department [9, p.47]. During fire extinguishing, fire fighters were obliged to comply with orders of a local head police master. Additionally, fire brigades were subsidized by the local authorities [9, p.48].

In our opinion, these Russian fire brigades’ legal status had certain contradictions from the beginning:
• Excessively formalized order of creation. Despite the urgent need for such brigades in every settlement, a personal permit from the emperor was required each time to set up a city fire brigade, which caused a lot of paperwork and wasted time.
• Subordination to a non-specialized government body and the absence of a specialized administrative body in the area of firefighting. Fire brigades were formed as structural units of the police, to which they reported. The direct subordination of fire brigade officials to police officers during fires resulted in a sharp decrease in the effectiveness of firefighting.
• Dual subordination of fire brigades to the police and local city authorities. The fire brigade staff was integrated into the general police staff and had to be approved personally by the Minister of Internal Affairs, but the entire funding for fire brigades was provided by the municipal exchequer. There was a strange situation of de facto dual subordination of fire brigades to the police and local city authorities.
• The absence of a legal obligation for professional training of firefighters. Retired members of the military were included in the number of firefighters. It was assumed that there was no need to train such “former military” personnel to work with firefighting equipment.
• The lack of an infrastructure for manufacturing firefighting equipment outside Saint-Petersburg and Moscow along with a complicated and costly process of specialist put the facilities and resources of the city fire brigades in jeopardy.

4. Methods
Our research is based on general scientific methods of analysis and synthesis and induction and deduction and historical and legal private methods of research. Archival materials of the personal collection of Count Sheremet’ev in the Russian State Historical Archive and the collection of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Empire in the State Archive of the Russian Federation are used.

5. Results and discussion
The starting point of the Russian Empire’s legal policy in the resolution of these contradictions, as well as the creation of a universal state system of fire brigades, can be called the introduction of the Normal Table of Fire Brigade Personnel. This 1853 document forced local authorities to establish a fire brigade in their cities instead of requiring the personal permission of the emperor. Moreover, the number of firefighters and other related details became regulated by the state. However, the problems
of double subordination and the lack of a single administrative body for fire brigades as well as professional training of fire fighters were not solved.

It can be assumed that the adoption of the *Normal Table of Fire Brigade Personnel* laid the foundation for legislative support of the Russian state's emergency management system. The *Normal Table* determined the range of subjects having special competence to perform such activities on behalf of the state. At the same time, it would not be quite correct to believe that from that moment on, firefighting was regulated across the country. The *Normal Table* determined the structure of fire brigades only in cities, while the majority of the population continued to live in rural areas, where fire protection had to be provided by the fire brigades consisting of ordinary people. Thus, the state took responsibility for ensuring fire safety only in urban areas.

In the next half century, there were heated discussions in the government and society regarding the effective implementation of emergency services and emergency management systems across country.

The 1830 and 1840s in the Russian Empire were a time of societal changes. Poor fire protection was one of the priorities among the social and economic issues that were of public interest at the time. That was when the idea of establishing the public fire brigade of volunteers was implemented. The first public fire brigade was created in 1843 in the town of Ostashkov in the Tver Governorate on the initiative of the town community. Other regions learned of Ostashkov’s success, and on December 28, 1860, the Committee of Ministers, satisfying the request of the town of Zubtsov to set up a public fire brigade gave permission “to create similar fire brigades in other cities as well” [10]. From 1871-1876 alone, 14 new free firefighting societies were formed in Russia, which created 14 new public fire brigades [11]. According to Sheremet’ev, by the early 1890s, there were already about 3,000 such firefighting associations in Russia [12]. By the early 1860s, there were two types of fire brigades in Russia: state police fire brigades and public city fire brigades. Simultaneous existence of fire brigades of different types in one settlement was allowed by law.

However, in 1870, the implementation of the municipal self-governance reform by Alexander the Second began to affect the legal status of fire brigades. The provisions of the reform, which created a system of public city self-governance with comprehensive powers to deal with all local economic issues, consolidated the practice of attributing the funding of “police” firefighting services to the local authorities. This meant that now local authorities were also liable for financing public fire brigades as well.

According to Art. 139 of the Municipal Statute (which confirmed the provisions of the *Normal Table of Fire Brigade Personnel* of 1853 and the Fire Charter of 1857), the city exchequer was obliged to allocate money “for the support of the fire brigades belonging to the city police; for accommodation and rent of premises for ... for a police fire brigade with heating and lighting, as well as for giving out the housing money to the city police and fire brigade officers who did not have the premises from the city; for material allowance of the brigades with supplies and equipment and for their medical treatment in city hospitals” [13].

There is an opinion that “support from city funds transferred fire brigades to the municipal category, which implied the responsibility of local authorities for the organization of fire protection” [5, p.150]. This assumption is unlikely to be accepted, since by the same municipal statute, the city exchequer was obliged to allocate funds “for the support of public fire brigades which existed before the enactment of this Statute or which were established on approval of city councils in return for or to strengthen the police fire brigades.” [13] These are public fire brigades that should be considered municipal as they were created by city authorities and were financed from the city budget and reported to city councils.

In any case, there was a rather specific situation at the time when the system of double subordination of “police” fire brigades was de facto.

The internal contradiction was well recognized by contemporaries, and city councils repeatedly tried to achieve complete subordination of police fire brigades to them. Some cases of such an activity have already become well-known but others are unknown [14].
Summing up the analysis of changes in the legal status of the brigades according to the city reform of 1870, it should be emphasized that the norms of the municipal statute included public fire brigades in the existing legal code of the country (on a regular basis rather than being an exception to the rules) but did not solve the problem of double subordination of police fire brigades.

The second half of the century, and especially the 1880-90s, can be rightly called the golden age of firefighter volunteering in Russia. At that time, another type of fire brigade emerged; the so-called private fire brigades and squads were created with funds from philanthropists. The management and internal organization and staff structure of the fire divisions essentially differed from public fire brigades. Created with private capital, they were not subordinate to the police or local city authorities. All the problems—from firefighter staffing to the number and types of extinguishing implements to the model of the uniform and symbols of the fire brigade—were tackled directly by the founders.

As Bushueva [15] points out, “in the second half of the 19th century in the Russian Empire, there were about eighteen types of fire brigades... - such as: city professional, city public fire brigades, free, rural, industrial, military, private, railway, voluntary fire brigades, volost (regional) fire brigades, fire artels, plant, factory (for example, at roperies and tanneries), serf, customs, prison brigades, palace fire brigades, and teams in military training institutions.” However, despite the diversity, these types of fire brigades can be reduced to three types: public police, public municipal, and private fire brigades.

There was often a lack of understanding between different types of fire brigades [2]. As a result, instead of interacting effectively during a fire, firefighters confused each other’s instructions and commands. The evidence of contemporaries and archival sources confirms that in the Russian society at the end of the XIX century, the criticism of city activities, i.e. state fire brigades, whose inaction was opposed to coordinated work of firefighting volunteers, became especially acute.

Eventually, numerous requests to the Senate and the Ministry of Internal Affairs led to the formation in 1900 of the Special Council to discuss the organization of fire protection in cities [16]. The archival materials preserved the evidence that the officials of the Ministry of Internal Affairs had been aware of the shortcomings in the management of the country's fire brigades: “The current situation of the so-called public city fire brigades serves ... as a cause for numerous disputes between city administrations and local provincial and police authorities. The reason for such misunderstandings lies in the lack of certainty of the grounds on which the structure of public brigades is based.” [17] Then, the certificate of the Economic Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs states that “currently, there are 3 types of firefighting forces: police fire brigades, public fire brigades and firefighting societies,” [18] whose services essentially overlap. The main difference, however, is

“in the order of staff approval and the way of recruitment... the police fire brigades' personnel is approved by the police department, which does not take any further part in this matter; the rest of the brigades' personnel is approved by the Economic Department, which then takes part in the development of measures for protecting property from fires... as for the recruitment for fire brigades, after delisting firefighting positions from official army ranks, the way of hiring fire fighters’ personnel is unified, namely civilian recruitment” [19].

At the end of the document, there is a preliminary conclusion stating proper organization of firefighting means is in the greatest interest of public institutions, which provide the necessary funds for this purpose” (author’s emphasis) [and since] the city economy affairs are in the competence of the Economic Department, it would seem to be possible to conclude that elaboration on the issue of proper organization of the firefighting activity in municipal settlements should be exclusively a concern of the abovementioned Department, to which the approval of the police fire brigades' personnel should then be delegated if it was considered necessary to keep these brigades in settlements where public brigades and societies work [20].

However, even this state, the initiative was not implemented, and the activity of the Special Council for discussing the issue of organizing fire protection in cities was limited to collecting information on the actual state of firefighting management in the country. It seems that the state in the period under consideration, aware of the urgency for a fire reform, could not find an effective way to carry it out for two reasons: 1. The reform required additional extensive funding, which was costly for
municipal budgets. 2. Funding could be obtained from voluntary firefighting societies, but the state refused to share the authority in the field of fire safety management with public organizations.

While the state authorities only analyzed the information about the state of firefighting management, public organizations discussed real projects of the firefighting reform.

Later, in 1892, at one of the private meetings of free firefighting societies within the framework of the First Congress of Fire fighters in St. Petersburg, a famous supporter of fire reform, Evgeniy Vasil’evich Bogdanovich, made an unexpected report. Bogdanovich proposed an idea of establishing a central government body to be in charge of firefighting in Russia: The Central Firefighting Inspectorial Office. One of the initiators and organizers of the Congress, Count A.D. Sheremet’ev, described the reaction of the meeting participants in the following words: “It is impossible not to welcome such a nice initiative, which aims to establish the ‘Central firefighting inspectorial office,’ consisting of a general-inspector of a fire department and 4 assistant-inspectors, reporting directly to the Minister of Internal Affairs. The current state of firefighting in Russia is so deplorable that the need to establish such a Government supervision body (author’s emphasis) of fire brigades’ activities in Russia is evident.” [21] The great specialist in the field of firefighting immediately determined the main purpose of the new state body: supervision over the activities of fire brigades.

However, having supported the very idea of establishing a single administrative and supervisory firefighting body, Sheremet’ev practically finalized the project of Bogdanovich and proposed his own project staff organization in the “inspectorial institution.” In particular, he wrote: “It is necessary to keep in mind that all our fire brigades are divided into two categories, namely, city and free fire societies with squads and private brigades... These two categories are so different that it is impossible to equate them to the same denominator, so to speak: what is useful and even desirable for the first category may not be applicable for the second category and vice versa. From this point of view, we believe that application of Bogdanovich's project to the case, as it was presented in his report at the Congress, can be applied only for the benefit of the brigades of the first category, i.e. city brigades. As for the second category, i.e. the firefighting societies with their squads and private brigades, taking into account the conditions under which these societies emerged and operated, the functions of the aforementioned inspection should be assigned to the main council of the United Russian Firefighting Society, and the chairman of the main council would report separately to the Minister of Internal Affairs. Thus, the Minister of Internal Affairs would have two assistants for firefighting activity, according to the classification of fire brigades in Russia, the general inspector would be a representative of city brigades, and the chairman of the main council of the United Russian Firefighting Company would be a representative of firefighting societies, squads, and private brigades, and hereby would serve as a permanent link between the government and the abovementioned societies.” [22]

The materials of the Sheremet’ev's collection in Russian State Historical Archive preserved a resolution of the private meeting, at which Bogdanovich’s project was discussed: “If the congress decides to request the establishment of a central government body for managing firefighting in Russia, it is desirable that a proper place should be given to representation from the free firefighting societies.” [23]

Sheremet’ev was so fond of the idea to reform the firefighting management system that in 1895 he published jointly with Bessonov, the brand master of Kherson, the Project of Firefighting Reform in Russia, in which he proposed a General Firefighting Administration as part of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the prototype of which was Bogdanovich’s Central Firefighting Inspectorial Office, described above. This General Firefighting Administration was supposed to become a single, general, and specialized firefighting body that could overcome all the contradictions in the country's firefighting services management system that were mentioned earlier. Moreover, according to the project, this body had to unite not only the management of “police” and public fire brigades but also the management of voluntary fire societies with private fire brigades. If this project had been implemented, a unique fire safety administrative body would have appeared in Russia within the framework of which the interaction of state and voluntary firefighting associations could have been
performed, exemplifying a public-private partnership in the field of protection of population from fires, which had never been seen before.

But implementing the idea of creating a single state management body in the field of fire safety took another 25 years full of tragic events that took many lives, Soviet Russia was forced to return to the discussion of fire reform in terms of finding an effective state structure capable of ensuring effective firefighting and implementing the emergency situations public function. On July 12, 1920, by the decree of the Council of People's Commissars of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic On the Concentration of Firefighting in NKVD (People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs of the USSR), the Central Fire Department was established, initiating a new state in the history of firefighting management in the country.

6. Conclusion
The Russian Empire was not able to solve the problems of a single management body and coordination of fire brigades, interaction between different types of fire brigades, and the poor training and equipment of state fire brigades, leaving the region without effective emergency services. However, other contradictions in the organizational system of fire protection were eliminated in different periods. The organizations were simplified only in 1860, when governors were given permission to create fire brigades without prior request for the Emperor's consent. Subordination to the relevant disaster, accident, and catastrophe management body occurred only in 2002, after the establishment of a specialized ministry. Dual subordination and lack of interaction between the different types of fire brigades persisted until the revolution of 1917. Professional firefighter training was introduced in 1906, starting with the Firefighters' Training Course in Saint Petersburg. The early private fire brigades catalyst for the development of the country's entire fire protection service as well as contributing to the scientific and technological progress in the field of firefighting.

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