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Charles Hermite and Mihailo Petrović : Influence of French Mathematics on Serbian Mathematical School

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After several centuries under the rule of the Ottoman Empire, Serbia was granted autonomy by the edict (Hatisherif) of the Ottoman Sultan Mahmud II in 1830. The edict marked a great turning point in the development of Serbia and encouraged the establishment of the Lyceum, the first higher education school in Serbia, in 1838, which would later become the Great School (1863), and then the University of Belgrade (1905). From the middle of the 19th century, the national task was to grant scholarships and send the state scholars to the best schools of the time to be educated abroad. Specifically, they were sent to one of three cultural centers: to Central European universities, to Paris, or, to a lesser extent, to Russian schools.

At that time, young people from Serbia were particularly attracted to France because of its liberal ideas, and they considered Paris a magical city. The French mathematical scene was one of the most lively in the world. and in 1889,Mihailo Petrović, a graduate student of the Great School in Belgrade, arrived at this in hub of mathematical thought.

Mihailo Petrović was the first Serb to become a student at the prestigious French national school –thr Ecole Normale Supérieure. He was allowed to take the same courses as his French colleagues and in the summer of 1894, he defended his Ph.D. thesis in differential equations before an examination committee consisting of Hermite, Picard and Painlevé. As one of the best students of his class, he attended the reception of the President of French Republic in 1893 and 1894. He became the leading Serbian mathematician of his time, and, today, he is considered the founder of the Serbian mathematical school.

In the presentation, we will look back at the national plan of the 19th century to educate Serbian scholars abroad, especially in France. Also, we will look at Petrović's education in Paris and the influence of his professors, especially his advisor Hermite, on his scientific work and more than 250 scientific papers in several mathematical fields: differential equation, numerical analysis, theory of function of a complex variable and geometry of polynomials. Even though most Serbian Ph.D. candidates in the field of Mathematical Sciences were educated at Austro-Hungarian and German universities and mainly showed interest in practical mathematics, applications to engineering and the development of analytic geometry, we will show how Petrović, after his return from Paris, defined the direction of the development of the Serbian mathematical school on the foundations of French mathematics and changed its course from predominantly practical mathematics and geometry to analysis. This school produced more than 800 renowned and successful mathematicians not only in Serbia but around the world.

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