Long among inhabitants of leprosy endemic regions of Russia, including Astrakhan, the Northern Caucasus and some areas of Siberia (Yakutia) there have been a notion that leprosy is a contagious disease, that’s why small houses were built for patients in order to isolate them from healthy household members.

But among practical doctors of the XVIII-XIX centuries both in Russia and other countries there were quite a number of supporters of anticontagionism of leprosy who considered that leprosy was a hereditary disease or some response of organism to unfavorable environmental factors.

The first published information on registered leprosy cases in Russian Empire being dated the end of the XVIII century appeared in the works of naturalists S.Gmelin (1745-1774), I.Falk (1727-1774), P.S.Pallas (1741-1811), who, according to the order of Russian Academy of Sciences studied flora and fauna of different regions of Russia.

At that time new border territories were inhabited with Cossack troops, privileged military order, served as guards to protect country borders and as police. Cossack troops (in total 11 in Russia) were distinct at that time for their excellent military and civil management. They had their own medical institutions. On the territory of Don Cossack troops on the Northern Caucasus there was a little leprosarium for 20-25 beds, so called “Vasilyevsky house”.

At the beginning of the XIX century there was an opinion, that for treatment of leprosy patients balneology factors (mineral waters, curable baths and mud therapy) of Caucasian health resorts were rather useful, and in 1830-1840 administration of Don Cossack troops intended to open at popular Pyatigorsk resort a peculiar department and baths for treatment of Don Cossacks having got wounds in war actions and suffered with long-standing diseases, including leprosy.

Against such a project supporters of the theory of leprosy contagiousness immediately stepped out.

The matter was discussed in the Medical Department of Home Affairs Ministry, which demanded from the medical administration “to depict Crimea leprosy in details with explanation of its nature, degree of contagiousness and usefulness of Caucasus mineral waters for its treatment”.

The medical administration charged Doctor of Medicine G.Plakhov to investigate a problem. After two years’ work in “Vasilyevsky house”, in September of 1839, he presented a manuscript of his investigation, and in 1841 the manuscript was issued in the form of monograph under the title “On tuberosa prokaza ("Elephantiasis graecorum") of Don Cossack troops”, in which the author, based on clinical and epidemiological observations of 27 patients and 7 autopsies, came to a conclusion that leprosy was not contagious and, hence, isolation of leprosy patients was not necessary and they could be treated together with patients suffered from other diseases.

Gregory Plakhov, a noble man, was born in 1810, in a family of Don Cossack. In 1829 he entered the medical faculty of Moscow University. Being a student he participated into the struggle with cholera. In 1834 he was awarded with a Gold medal for the best tractate on a proposed theme. In 1838 G.Plakhov defended his dissertation on surgery “De
Chelioplastica”. Being Cossack by born, he began to work as a physician in the Medical Administration of Don Cossack troops. He died in 1842. Over his short life Dr G.Plakhov, in addition to mentioned monograph on leprosy, published six more scientific works on different aspects of infectious diseases and surgery.

Medicinal baths for leprosy patients were opened in 1842, but soon they were closed because of the protests of local medical practitioners.

At the same period, in 1835, new regulations of the management of Don Cossack troops were passed. The regulations, including a section “About a hospital for leprosy patients”, were compiled by those practitioners who considered leprosy as a highly contagious disease. This could be seen from the extract of “A Codex of Laws of Russian Empire. Saint-Petersburg. 1857, division 8, page 215-216”, where the instruction was issued:

…”a hospital for leprosy patients… should not only deliver possible relief to the sufferers but also prevent from infection of other people as leprosy is easily transmitted to a healthy person…

… persons infected with leprosy are taken into such a hospital notwithstanding state differences…

… any contacts with leprosy patients are prohibited.

…. communities should not keep persons infected with leprosy in their households, but isolate them in hospitals without a moment’s delay.

… the family been exposed as shelties of a leprosy person should be imposed a fine, in case due to such shelter illness passed to other persons in the family or in other houses, the guilty should be judged…”

In 1860 in Russia, as in other countries, R. Virhow’s letter was published with a call to send him information on leprosy. That appeal sharply increased activity in the field of studying leprosy by Russian doctors.

In particular, a great deal of the work was done by Doctor K.Kozlowsky who studied leprosy prevalence in Tersky region (territory of the Northern Caucuses bordering with lands of Don Cossack troops).

Doctor K. Kozlowsky supported the opinion of hereditary transmission of the disease. His conclusions together with arguments of Dr G.Plakhov, led to closing some little leprosaria in 1870th in the South of Russia, including “Vasilevsky House”.

A.Hansen’s description of leprosy bacillus (1874) was for the first time discussed in Russia at the session of the Society of Medical Practitioners in Saint-Petersburg in March of 1881 after the publication of Hansen’s article in “Virchow Archive” (1880).

A speaker, Doctor of Medicine D.Shoolgowsky supported the infectious nature of leprosy. He expounded Hansen’s work and then presented the results of his own morphological investigations confirming Hansen’s data. Among those who spoke at the session the supporters of the hereditary nature of leprosy predominated.

Dr D.N.Shoolgowsky was graduated from Saint-Petersburg Medical and Surgical Academy (SPb MSA) and in 1874 he defended his dissertation under the title “Materials for Pathological Histology of Chancres”. He was famous for his translations and editions of a number of famous European manuals on internal, skin and venerial diseases.

In the last quarter of the XIX century when contagiousness of leprosy was cast a light in special literature and mass media discussions in the connection with the results of the activity of Special Commission of English doctors in India and with discussion of this problem by French Academy of Sciences, in Russia a wide dispute between contagionists
led by a known infectionist and pathological anatomist, Professor G.N. Munkh and anticontagionists headed by the founder of dermatological school in Russia Professor A.G. Polotebnov was developed.

Professor G.N. Munkh (1836-1896) was graduated from Medical faculty of Moscow University. Since 1876 up to 1895 he served as Professor in pathological anatomy at Kiev University. He performed rather interesting works of high scientific and practical value devoted to studying typhoid and plague. Over more than 20 years he studied leprosy prevalence at first in Astrakhan province and then in different regions of northern Caucasus, in the Crimea, in the Middle Asia, in Egypt and Palestine. Professor G.N. Munch was the author of 5 monographs on leprosy.

Prof. G.N. Munch was the author of 5 monographs on leprosy.

Prof. A.G. Polotebnov (1838-1907) after graduating from SPb MSA worked for 3 years at therapeutic clinics, and then, in 1867-1870 years, he studied skin diseases in Vienna and Paris. Since 1876 he was in charge of the Chair of Skin Diseases of MSA. He was a founder of a pioneer direction towards studying skin diseases based on the principle of nervism.
So, furious discussion concerning the nature of leprosy process developing in the XIX century was headed by highly educated specialists succeeded in getting prominent achievements in their professional activity. And this fact speaks of complexity of the problem.

It should be acknowledged that by the end of the XIX century practically all the practicians stood up for founding leprosaria, because in such special hospitals leprosy patients could get certain medical help and adequate care. Problems connected with legitimacy of forcible isolation of leprosy patients in special hospitals remained unsolved and continued to be widely discussed.