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## Citizenship in 18<sup>th</sup> Century Russian Towns

It is a common knowledge that Russian towns were absolutely different from those in Western Europe especially as far as civil rights of the townsmen are concerned. Still it seems that the origins of Russian and Western towns were in some way similar as they first appeared as military, administrative and trade centers. The historians of Russian towns have not yet decided whether the main reason for the appearance of the first towns was the need to defend themselves and that is why country people used to build wooden fortresses which later became towns or it was trade that made people get together and found a town, or it were Russian princes who founded towns as administrative and fiscal points. It is considered that first Russian towns appeared in the 8<sup>th</sup> century but nobody knows how many towns existed even in the 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> centuries as it is not easy to decide what in fact may be considered a town. By now we know of about 1400 fortified places but only 70 of them were definitely towns. A typical Russian town of the period was a place surrounded by wooden walls with a smaller fortress in the center of it called *detinets* or *kremlin* which used to be the residence of the prince, his family, his garrison, his serfs and servants. It was also there where a town's cathedral was built and where the clergy lived. The *detinets* was surrounded by a *posad* inhabited mostly by traders and artisans but at least about 15% of the population were in fact engaged in agriculture. But even those who were not lived in wooden houses and their households included gardens, kitchen-gardens and they certainly owned some cattle. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century dozens of Russian towns were devastated by the Mongol invasion but in the 14<sup>th</sup> century new towns appeared.

What made Russian towns very different from those in Western Europe was that their air never made anyone free. With only few exceptions (Novgorod, Pskov) Russian towns were part of the princes' domains and their inhabitants had no special privileges, no self-government institutions and it goes without saying that there existed no special legislation for the towns and townsmen. Each town was ruled by a *voevoda* (literally: an army leader) – actually an official appointed by the prince whose main task was to collect taxes. Also Russian towns had no universities and there was nothing that may be considered a special urban culture.

By the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century the territory that we know as Russia was a united centralized country with Moscow as the capital city and the Russian tsar as the master of the land who ruled about 180 towns inhabited by approximately 2% of the country's population. The townsmen were divided into several social categories. On the top of the social hierarchy there were the so called *guests* – the richest merchants, usually whole-sale dealers but in fact this was a very small group. For instance there were only 13 guests in Moscow (largest city in the country)

in the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Then there were more numerous members of the so called guest and cloth hundreds. All of them had some privileges concerning tax paying and other obligations. But the majority of the townsmen were the so called *posadkye*, lodgers of the *posad* - petty traders and artisans who were attached to their towns and whose chances for geographical mobility were restricted to a minimum. All these people had an official social status of townsmen. But certainly there were some other people who also lived in a town like clerks, clergy, people with no stable income and so on.

I've mentioned earlier that Russian towns didn't know any forms of self-government but this assertion needs to be specified. It is obvious that a *voevoda* who usually had only few people to help him couldn't rule and couldn't have control over a town with several thousand inhabitants just by himself while the central government lacked enough officials whom it could send to help him. Besides a *voevoda* was to rule not only the town but also a vast territory around it. That is why the government used special instruments based on what is called in Russian *obshina* and what is usually translated into English as a *community*. But that was not a community based on a free will of its members but actually an institution of control over the population. The community members were divided into tens, fifties and hundreds with elected elders who were responsible for collecting taxes and execution of other obligations. There also existed such an institution as a general meeting of the community members but again what they discussed was issues concerning distribution of taxes and obligations.

This is a general description of Russian towns prior to the 18<sup>th</sup> century which perfectly corresponds the image of Russia as a despotic country. Without going into details it should be mentioned that there appeared lately a kind of a revisionist trend in historiography which argues that though despotic in its nature Russian power didn't have total control over the population who in fact did have certain civil rights. For instance Nancy Kollmann of Stanford University published a book in which she explored a discourse of personal honor in early modern Russia.<sup>1</sup> She has shown that though "Muscovite codes of honor differed from those in many contemporaneous European countries, where the tendency by the early modern period was for corporate groups – guilds, nobilities – to define separate codes of honor", in Russia honor "was a rhetoric of personal dignity that accrued to all subjects of the tsar, regardless of social rank" and it was a strong mechanism of promoting social cohesion while "the tsar styled himself as the center of a community of honor".

Nevertheless radical changes associated with the name of Peter the Great came into Russian life in the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In 1697-1698 Peter made a trip to Western Europe

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<sup>1</sup> Nancy Shields Kollmann. *By Honor Bound. State and Society in Early Modern Russia*. Cornell University Press. 1999.

visiting Holland, England, Austria and Saxony. According to his own words this trip was a kind of a school for him. What interested him most of all were various technical, industrial and scientific achievements. That is why he visited plants and factories, docks and workshops, anatomic theatres and observatories and he returned to Russia with an image of Europe as a vast territory covered with plants and workshops and dreaming of Russia looking the same way. Still it seems he had realized that the social force that was needed to make his dreams true was in the towns. What he obviously didn't realize was in what way it was connected with the townsmen's liberties and rights. Nevertheless soon after his return he suggested that the townsmen who didn't like to be ruled by a *voevoda* (there was a lot of evidence that most of them didn't) could instead elect a body of their own. At the same time Peter used to think that having a such an elected body was a kind of a privilege in itself as it was announced that the towns who chose this form of government were to pay double taxes. What happened next was very typical both for Peter and his subjects. Some towns declared that they were quite all right with their *voevodys* and didn't want to change anything. Other towns did elect the needed bodies but pretended to forget about double tax paying. As for Peter he was always very quick at learning his lessons and a year later he ordered all the towns to elect special government bodies that since this moment were to rule the towns and abolished double taxpaying. At first these bodies got a Russian name of *zemskye izby* and were subordinated to the Moscow *rathhaus* founded at the same time. *Zemskaya izba* was headed by an elected *bürgermeister* or *bürgermeisters* (depending on the number of the town's population) and included scribes, watchmen and other servicemen also elected by the townsmen. They were to control elders and other elected people responsible for collecting various taxes. It was the responsibility of the *zemskaya izba* to bring the collected money to Moscow, to keep the registers of the town's taxpayers, to issue permissions for those of them who wished to make business trips to other places, to register all kind of business deals and to investigate into various conflicts, except criminal ones .

In fact this reform appeared to be the first step to make ruling of the towns a special branch of the country's government. The next step was made in 1720 when *zemskye izby* were converted into town *magistrates* and the Principal (or Main) Magistrate was founded in Moscow. It was the moment when Peter the Great was reforming his central administration and founded several new central government institutions, called *colleges*. All of them were subordinated to the Senate, the main executive body, and the Principal Magistrate among them thus becoming a kind of a ministry of towns. After Peter died in 1725 the new government which found itself in a situation of a financial crisis and was desperately looking for ways of wasting money sparingly liquidated the Principal Magistrate in 1727 but in 1743 it was restored by Peter's daughter empress Elisabeth.

The reforms of Peter the Great that concerned Russian towns were not limited just to the government. Peter radically changed social structure of the Russian society, giving different social groups a new status. Starting in 1718 Peter gradually introduced a new tax system which was based on the tax paid by each male excluding noblemen and clergy. This demanded a census of the population and establishing special books where all the males were registered. As far as getting its money was crucial for the government it wanted all the taxpayers to stay at the places where they were registered and introduced passports that were to be given to those members of the town community who wanted to leave the town for business purposes. A passport included a physical description of its bearer and mentioned where exactly and for how long he was going. At the same time there were issued laws which demanded that any person without a passport, or with a false passport, or an expired passport should be immediately arrested, punished and returned to the place where he was registered. Everyone who came across an unknown person was to report about him immediately and punished if he didn't. Thus the townsmen geographical mobility became even more limited than before.

One more important thing should be mentioned about taxpaying. Each male regardless of his age was to pay the same sum of money. That meant that it was equal for grown up people, just born infants and old disable men. The government realized that it was useless for a tax collector to try to get the money from a child, especially if he was an orphan. That is why it was not a personal responsibility of each taxpayer but a collective responsibility of the whole town community. That meant that while formally the sum of the poll-tax was the same for everyone, in fact the community members had to distribute taxes among themselves and the richest of them had to pay for those who were not able to do it. One of the outcomes of this system was that the community did not want its well-to-do members to move to other towns. Again, formally they had the right to do it by coming to another town and applying the local community to be registered there as taxpayers but also they had to get a permission from their old community which was reluctant to issue it. As a result some people were registered in two towns simultaneously and paid taxes in both places.

Another point of the government's anxiousness was the number of taxpayers. That is why it made everything possible to minimize the number of those who could escape it by liquidating different marginal social groups. As far as the towns were concerned all its inhabitants who had not been registered as members of the community by the time census started were either to be sent to the army or to the villages as peasants or made townsmen. From this moment all the inhabitants of a Russian town got a common name of *merchants* though only a small part of them were in fact engaged in trade operations. According to Peter's the Great legislation the merchants were even divided into three guilds according to their incomes though even the richest

of them, merchants belonging to the first-grade guild did not get any privileges different from the third-grade members.

Another novelty that came to the Russian town with the reforms of Peter the Great was army service. It is used to consider the regular army established by Peter one of his greatest achievements but it was based on the obligation of the population, townsmen included, to send their members to the army whenever the state announced levy recruitment. Each time it was announced that a certain number of recruits were to be sent to the army taken from a certain number of inhabitants. Once it could be one person from a thousand and another time three from 500. During the wars that were very frequent in 18<sup>th</sup> century Russia levy recruitment could be announced 2 or 3 times a year while in peacetime it could be once in 3 or even 5 years. Army service was lifetime and it was the community's responsibility to decide whom personally to convert into a soldier. It is only natural that usually the poorest, those who couldn't pay tax poll were chosen. With the regular army there came another obligation and that is of billeting. Again formally the townsmen were to let military in their houses according to a certain order kept by the magistrate. But in reality it was the cause of numerous abuse and conflicts.

As it has been mentioned the town's government was elected by the townsmen but in fact it had little to do with self-government. A townsman could be elected as a *bürgermeister*, a *ratmann*, a policeman, an elder or to a number of other positions in the town's administration but none of them gave any privileges or chances of enrichment. That is why most often the townsmen did their best to escape what was called town service. Town archives contain numerous petitions from people engaged in these services and as a result ruined because they couldn't go on with their business.

Generally speaking the result of Peter's the Great reforms was that Russian townsmen as well as other social groups became even less free than before. Their position was in fact similar to that of serfs with the only difference that serfs belonged to private owners while townsmen fully belonged to the state. What did change was that now the state considered all the people its subjects and when a new emperor ascended the throne the townsmen had to take an oath together with nobility. Also from now on the same form of addressing the tsar was used by all the subjects and that was "your imperial majesty's obedient slave".

As far as serfdom is concerned it should be mentioned that by the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century owning serfs was not a privilege of the nobility and some well-to-do townsmen also owned several serfs. The documents of the period show that townsmen were even more active in the trade of serfs than noblemen. But as far as it was considered (though not written in any law) that owning serfs was a kind of prize to noblemen for their service to the tsar during the first and following censuses made non-nobles who owned serfs to sell them off. At the same time as far as

after Peter's the Great fiscal reform every subject of the tsar was tightly tied to one of social groups there in fact were no resources of free labor market, i.e. there were no free people who could be hired as workers. That is why in 1721 Peter the Great issued a law according to which an owner of a plant or a factory, even if he was not a nobleman, got a right to buy serfs and convert them into workers. After Peter's death the government gradually limited this right by connecting the number of serfs that could be bought with the size of a plant or a factory until it was finally abolished by Emperor Peter III in 1762.

In the middle of the century the townsmen got another peculiar right and that is to get rid of those who were reluctant to be good members of the town's community. People who didn't want to work, spent their time in drinking alcohol or clashes and conflicts with their neighbors and thus didn't have money to pay their taxes or execute other obligations, could be sent to exile to Siberia with their families. The decision was taken at a community meeting who also had to give this person some money and clothes that he and members of his family would need on their way to exile. For the government the goal of this measure was colonization of Siberia and that is why only men under 45 could be sent there.

The situation with the rights of the townsmen started to change as Catherine the Great come to power in 1762. Catherine was well-read in literature of the time, her favorite author was *Montesquieu* and she ascended the throne with a political program based on the intention to give Russia judicial estates of European type. From the French enlighteners she had learned that most important was the third estate which in the Russian version was to consist of townsmen and constitute a *middle class of people* as Catherine called it, placed between nobility and peasants who were to constitute the two other estates.

In the first years of her rein Catherine tried to give the initiative of creating new laws to her subjects and in 1767 she opened the meetings of the Legislative commission that consisted of about 550 deputies elected by different social groups. Among them were 208 deputies who represented the towns and that was the largest delegation. Catherine wrote her famous Grand Instruction for the deputies which was based mostly on the ideas of *Montesquieu* slightly adapted to Russian reality. According to her own words the Instruction was to show the deputies the path for the composition of the new legislation. But to Catherine's surprise and dismay most of the deputies appeared not prepared for such serious work and could understand too little of *Montesquieu*. Instead the debates in the commission showed sharp contradictions between interests of different social groups. One of the most striking was between the nobility and townsmen. It wasn't anything similar to that of in prerevolutionary France but it was the struggle for a monopoly in trade and business enterprise. While the townsmen argued that the nobility's duty was to serve the tsar in the army and government and they shouldn't be engaged in trade or

industry the nobles used to remind them that they were the only owners of land on which plants could be built and of the entrails of the earth used for the produce. Besides the only labour force that could be used at plants and factories were peasants a greater part of whom were also owned by nobles who now had a monopoly in owning serfs.

After a year and half of useless debates Catherine dismissed the commission under a pretext of a war with Turkey that started in December, 1768. But the lesson was not in vain. Later Catherine used to say that the Legislative commission «gave us light and knowledge of whom we deal with and should take care of». As soon as the war was over a new period of Catherine's reforms began. Now she was writing the new laws by herself. In March 1775 it was proclaimed that from this moment everyone had the right to start his business without asking any permission from the central government or local administration. Also a reform of merchant guilds was undertaken. To become a member of the third, second or first-grade guild one had now to announce that he was the owner of a *capital* - a certain sum of money. Only those who did could enter the guild and bear the name of a merchant. Members of the guilds got real privileges: they became free of paying poll-tax and recruitment obligations. Instead the merchants were to pay a special tax – 1% of the announced capital. This tax substituted not only poll-tax but also a number of other taxes that traders and factory owners were paying previously. The reform proved to be quite effective. While only 27.000 of 220.000 people enlisted as merchants before the reform entered the guilds anew, the capitals of S.-Petersburg merchants in the last quarter of the century grew 3,5 times and 100 new families entered the first-grade guild in Moscow. It should be also mentioned that all the townsmen who didn't have enough money to become members of the merchants guilds now got a new name of *meschane* derived from the Polish *mieszczanin* – a townsman.

Half a year later Catherine the Great undertook a large-scale reform of local administration in general and of towns in particular. The reform was planned long before but was realized as priority after the revolt of peasants and cossacks in 1773-1774. Catherine's answer to it was making accent on self-government. The town magistrates were now formed anew and got some extra functions. In fact they became not only administrative but also legal bodies for criminal and civil cases. It was their function to enlist people in the merchant guilds, to register business deals, to issue passports, to control the trade operations including the quality of goods on sale and so on. The reform also changed the administrative structure of the country by multiplying the number of provinces. That meant that instead of 10 about 50 towns became now provincial centers with the corresponding institutions. One of the obligations of the provincial administration was organization of schools, hospitals, orphanages, almshouses, etc. What was

most important that the appearance of new institutions in the provincial centers meant that more educated people arrived there bringing with them new daily practices and new way of life.

In 1782 Catherine the Great established regular police forces in Russian towns (before that regular police existed only in S.-Petersburg and Moscow) and three years later, on April 21, 1785 she promulgated her Charter to the Towns. It certainly wasn't accidental that the same day another charter – the Charter to the Nobility was published. Approximately a century later historians discovered that in her desk Catherine also had a third charter addressed to the peasants. American historians David Griffiths and George Munro who translated the three charters into English and carefully compared them argue that taken together the charters were a constitution in the pre-Revolutionary sense of the word.

The Charter to the Towns once again changed the social structure of the towns population. All its inhabitants were now united into a so called “town society” which consisted of 6 categories of people – the “real” town lodgers registered as taxpayers, members of the merchant guilds, artisans enlisted in artisan guilds, eminent townsmen, foreigners and *posadskye*, i.e. inhabitants of town's suburbs. All of them were to be registered in special books. Besides members of the town magistrate, the townsmen were now to elect the head of the town and the town council which consisted of the representatives of all the six categories of townsmen. Members of the town council in their turn elected a so called Six-Votes Council with six members, each representing one category of town's inhabitants. That was a rather complicated system and though Catherine described the functions of each of its parts in detail, in practice not everything worked effectively enough. But in general the meaning of this reform for Russian towns was really great.

Catherine's the Great reforms of Russian towns were severely criticized both by Russian 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century and Soviet historians. But in the last 20 years the attitude to these reforms has gradually changed. Nowadays most historians argue that it was wrong to think that Catherine's goal was just industrial development of Russian towns and to look for its results immediately after the reform was undertaken. It has become obvious that Catherine was much wiser than some of those who tried to evaluate her deeds long after her death. She certainly wanted to stimulate the economic development of Russian towns but she also realized that it couldn't start to work immediately but needed time. It also couldn't start working before the self-consciousness of Russian townsmen changed and they learned to use the mechanisms she gave them. That could take a long time.

Lately Russian historians started to pay more attention to local history and there appeared about a dozen of new studies based on the documents of local archives from different regions of the country. Special attention was paid to the functioning of local elected institutions and the

attitude of the townsmen towards them. Recent research show that gradually Russian townsmen started to realize that they could use the local institutions to their own advantage learned the election mechanisms and became more and more active in election procedures. They were no more reluctant to participate in the work of these institutions but were eager to elect and be elected. It should be mentioned that the townsmen were not the only social group who got their self-government institutions at that time – Russian nobility also got them. But recent studies of elections show that the townsmen were even more active than noblemen. Some of the scholars argue that these institutions of self-government were in fact germs of civil society while the townsmen started to feel themselves more like citizens and not just subjects of the tsar. Unfortunately this process was interrupted by the sudden death of Catherine the Great in 1796 as her son Paul I limited the rights of the new institutions once again. When in 1801 he was succeeded by his son Alexander I it was already a new political reality.