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Was there a Commune in Medieval Pskov?

Some Recent Findings in Comparative Perspective

We owe the title of our paper to Professor Ludwig Steindorff, who addressed a similar problem in his presentation at the “round-table” on Novgorod’s *veche* held at the European University at St. Petersburg two years ago. His paper was entitled «Is it correct to consider Novgorod a commune?» Referring to Max Weber’s famous work, *The City*, and drawing on present-day scholarly literature on medieval cities (including his own research on Dalmatian cities), Professor Steindorff gave a negative answer to the above question. Although he focused only upon Novgorod the Great, Steindorff definitely had in mind all Russian medieval cities and towns that did not possess, in his opinion, any features of a city commune¹.

We disagree with Professor Steindorff on this matter, but our response to his provocative and stimulating paper will be “asymmetrical”: we will address the same question with respect to another medieval Russian city, Pskov, and will test his arguments on the basis of its sources.

Before searching for some phenomenon (in this case, a medieval city commune), it is essential to define what we are looking for. What are the criteria by which a city commune can be defined? Professor Steindorff proposes the following:

1. The availability of special terms to refer to a commune in Latin (*commune, communitas, universitas, etc.*) or in other languages (*Gemeinde* in German, etc.).
2. A sharp difference between citizens and other inhabitants who did not possess political rights. The circle of burghers was strictly defined; membership in the commune was sealed by oath.

¹ Ludwig Steindorff, “Pravil’no li schitat’ Novgorod kommunoi?” [Is It Correct to Consider Novgorod a Commune?], *Spory o novgorodskom veche: mezhdisciplinarnyi dialog* [Debates on Novgorodian *veche*: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue], ed. Mikhail Krom (St. Petersburg: European University at St. Petersburg Press, 2012), 228 – 241.

3. A special city law.
4. The formation of a government body, a city council.

It is easy to conclude that Professor Steindorff's core argument relies on a classic work of historical sociology, Max Weber's *Die Stadt (The City)*. Weber maintained that the city «im vollen Sinn des Wortes», i.e., a “commune”, had existed only in the Occident for a short period.² The main feature of the occidental city was its corporate character, i.e., the commune was a unity of the citizens as individuals regardless of their belonging to any tribe, social group, or party. In Weber's words: “the privileged position of the burgher was a right of the individual also vis-à-vis outside parties”.³ The fact of belonging to a commune was confirmed by a burgher via an oath.

Max Weber did not mention Novgorod, Pskov, or any other medieval Russian city. But while referring to Russian cities before and after the abolition of serfdom (1861), he clearly classified this type of city as non-Western and different from a commune in the proper sense⁴. So Steindorff obviously extends the same line of argumentation to early Russian cities and towns.

What follows is an attempt to test Professor Steindorff's arguments and to substantiate an alternative view on the existence of city communes in medieval Rus'.

1. Let us start with a terminological argument. Professor Steindorff pays special attention to the fact that in Novgorodian sources there is no equivalent to the Latin term *communitas*. He argues that in all countries where communes were formed there was in fact such a term, e.g. *Gemeinde* in Germany, *općina* in Dalmatian cities, etc. The last example is especially instructive, from Professor Steindorff's point of view, because it shows that Slavic languages could also produce a term that signified something “common” and then acquired the meaning of a commune. So if Novgorod lacked a term for a commune, Professor Steindorff argues, it also lacked the phenomenon itself. However, Professor Steindorff's argu-

² Max Weber, *Economy and society* (The University of California Press: Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1978), 1226-1227.

³ *Ibid.*, 1249.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1237-1238.

ment can be challenged from several points of view. First of all, it is worth asking how the term *općina* appeared. Steindorff mentions that Dalmatia “was the place where Latin and Slavic written languages closely interwove”⁵. We think that this “interweaving” gives us a clue: according to Professor Steindorff, the term *općina* appeared for the first time in a treaty which was initially written in Latin and then translated into Slavic. But this fact explains everything! A translator could coin a new word or give a broader meaning to the old one, but anyway there is no evidence that the term *općina* had the meaning of “commune” *before* this translation appeared. So we may conclude that the Dalmatian term for a commune was just a loan translation from Latin, born in a contact zone of the two languages. Probably the German term *Gemeinde* had a similar origin since in the early communal epoch Latin was more dominant than German as a written language. Meanwhile neither Novgorod nor Pskov was familiar with Latin, so both Russian cities lacked an intermediary language which could serve as a stock of ready-made abstract terms.

But if Novgorodians and Pskovites did not coin or borrow an abstract term for commune, it does not mean that they had no formulas which in *certain contexts* might refer to the common interests of the city, to the townsfolk as a whole, etc. So the crucial question is whether we are looking for a familiar word or for a concept that can be expressed in different terms. Here we refer to Reinhart Koselleck’s plea for alternating semasiological and onomasiological approach to the history of concepts:

“The investigation of a concept cannot be carried out purely semasiologically; it can never restrict itself to the meanings of words and their changes. A *Begriffsgeschichte* must always keep in view the need for findings relevant to intellectual or material history. Above all, the semasiological approach must alternate with onomasiological; i.e., *Begriffsgeschichte* must register the variety of names for (identical?) materialities in order to be able to show how concepts are formed”⁶.

⁵ Steindorff, “Pravil’no li schitat’ . . .”, 235.

⁶ Reinhart Koselleck, “*Begriffsgeschichte* and Social History”, in Koselleck, *Futures Past: on the Semantics of Historical Time*, transl. by Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 87.

Adopting an onomasiological approach to the Pskov material, we find a contextual equivalent to “commune: the expression “all Pskov” (*ves’ Pskov*), which, as will be shown below, referred to the common will of all Pskovites and symbolized the unity of the city.

2. The terms *all Pskov* (*ves’ Pskov*) and *all Pskovites* (*vse Pskovichi*) are frequently found in the Pskov sources. The terms are synonyms; they have the same meaning in almost every Pskov document. For example, the treaty of 1417 between Pskov and Livonian Order reads:

... *Dar umme heft unsere herschaft uns utgesandt, de borgermeister von Pleskow und alle Plekowe Niin helpen... up uns Pleskowers*⁷.

(*We were sent by our authorities, the posadnik of Pskov and all Pskov ... Not to help against us, Pskovites.*)

Let us remember that such similarity of terms was also characteristic of the early communal German cities where a city was not a judicial body itself, but an aggregate of its burghers.⁸ Such expressions as *burgenses nostros de Lubeke*⁹ also prevail in legal documents of that period. The expression used in the plural means a sum of individuals rather than the whole judicial body.

What group of the population is meant by the term Pskovites (*pskovichi*)? Are they only the Pskov citizens, or are they also those who inhabited the whole Pskov land? The treaty between Casimir, the Grand Duke of Lithuania, and Pskov reads:

... *Grand Duke of Lithuania made a treaty with all Pskov, all Pskov dependent towns and all the Pskov land.*¹⁰

As we can see, the term *Pskov* does not refer to subordinate towns and to the Pskov land, which are mentioned separately. It is Pskov that signs the treaty on their behalf, as we also see in the treaty between Pskov and Livonian Order:

⁷ *Gramoty Velikogo Novgoroda i Pskova* [The Charters of Novgorod the Great and Pskov], ed. by S. N. Valk (Moscow; Leningrad: The USSR Academy of Sciences Press, 1949), 318.

⁸ W. Ebel, *Der Burgereid als Geltungsgrund und Gestaltungsprinzip des deutschen mittelalterlichen Stadtrechts* (Weimar, 1958), 71.

⁹ *Elenchus fontium historiae urbanae* (Leiden, 1967), 156.

¹⁰ *Gramoty Velikogo Novgoroda i Pskova* [The Charters of Novgorod the Great and Pskov], 322.

...*The Pskov posadniks and “the well-doing people” of Pskov should kiss the cross (take the oath) for Pskov dependent towns and all Pskov state.*¹¹

The above examples demonstrate that Pskovites were authorized to sign treaties on behalf of inhabitants of all the Pskov land. We can find some evidence of the difference that existed between Pskovites, on the one hand, and dwellers of the subordinate towns and of the Pskov land, on the other, in the chronicles too:

*At that time the Pskov prince Vasilij Vasiljevich and the Pskov posadniks began to summon the inhabitants of dependent towns and all land; and when Pskovites and dependent town dwellers and all the people gathered together...*¹²

It is not the only example. Moreover, it is obvious that Pskovites (*pskovichi*) in the chronicles are always Pskov citizens, and not inhabitants of its subordinate towns, who are mentioned in the chronicles under the names of their own towns *Kobyliani* (inhabitants of Kobilii), *Izboriane* (inhabitants of Izborsk), etc. The term Pskovites did not even include the inhabitants of the Pskov suburbs, i.e., the city *extra murum* territory. This conclusion is corroborated by the passage from the Pskov 1st Chronicle about the construction of a wall that the suburbanites erected *at their expense*¹³ in 1465. There is an obvious difference between Pskovites and suburbanites in this passage.

The phrase *at their expense* is extremely important. What was the suburbanites' motivation? There is little doubt that due to the new wall they gained a new judicial status, in addition to the protection provided by the wall, which was not much needed from the military point of view. Thus the construction of a new wall lifted suburbanites to the status of Pskovites. The chronicle's passage highlights the city's growth accompanied by an increase in the number of its citizens, who were now called by the common term *grazhane*,¹⁴ i.e., burghers.

Did Pskovites possess any special rights and judicial status distinguishing them from other Pskov land inhabitants?

¹¹ *Gramoty Velikogo Novgoroda i Pskova* [The Charters of Novgorod the Great and Pskov], 336.

¹² *Pskovskije letopisi* [The Pskov Chronicles], ed. A. N. Nasonov, 2 vols. (Moscow & Leningrad: The USSR Academy of Sciences Press, 1941 – 1955), 1: 77.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 2: 60.

The only element of the list of authorities never omitted in the documents was the term *all Pskov* itself. For example, the above-cited treaty between Pskov and the Livonian Order (1417) with the frequently repeated phrase *our authorities, the Pskov posadnik and all Pskov* also contains a shortened variant *all Pskov* which refers to the party with whom the master was to make peace. The treaty between Pskov and the Livonian Order (1503) reads:

Von dem fursten von Pleskaw Dimitre Volodimerewitz, von den borgermeistern to Pleskaw de oversten, von olden borgermeistern, und von alle grote Pleskaw.

*(From the Pskov prince Dmitriy Volodimerewitz, from the chair posadniks, from the old posadniks and from all the Great Pskov...)*¹⁵

The master of the Livonian Order was also to be blamed by *all Pskov* according to the same text. So one may conclude that it is *all Pskov*, but not the Pskov prince or *posadnik* that was the main actor in foreign relations. The Order and the king make peace with Pskov as with a juridical person. The fact that princes and *posadniki*, being the Pskov representatives or executors of its will, are included in *intitulatio* of the treaty, reveals the power structure of Pskov. They are not the city's masters or lords with whom personally a treaty could be made.

Art. 108 of the Pskov Judicial Charter reads:

*If [in the present,] original [Pskov Judicial] Charter some matter is missing, then the posadnik should refer the matter to the Lord Pskov at a veche, and write that case [into the Pskov Judicial Charter]. If in the future some provision in this Charter is not to the liking of the Lord Pskov, then he is free to remove that provision from this Charter.*¹⁶

Here we can see the subordinate position of *posadnik* in relation to the *Lord Pskov*. The phrase *is not to the liking of the Lord Pskov* shows that it is Pskov who in the minds of Pskovites is the collective possessor of power. Of course, there can be a difference between the perception of power and the real political situation at a

¹⁵ *Gramoty Velikogo Novgoroda i Pskova* [The Charters of Novgorod the Great and Pskov], 331.

¹⁶ *Pskovskaja Sudnaja Gramota. Text. Kommentarii. Issledovanie*. [The Pskov Judicial Charter. Text. Commentary. Investigation], ed. Yu. G. Alexeev. (Pskov: Pskov University 1997), 47.

given moment. Can we assume that Pskovites had the right to make any political decisions without the magistrates?

We think that this question can be answered in the affirmative. We can see in the chronicles that Pskovites (*all Pskov*) make political decisions at *veche* without the magistrates' participation. Trial and execution at *veche* are mentioned several times there. We can suppose that neither prince nor *posadnik* took part in such a trial because there is an article in the Pskov Judicial Charter that forbids both princes and *posadniks* to hold a trial at *veche*. The latter held trials in the prince's residence. We can find the detailed description of such a trial corresponding to the Pskov Judicial Charter's norms in the Snetogorsky monastery charter (1483).¹⁷

Theoretically, all Pskovites as a whole were the possessors of power, but in reality they had legislative initiative and judicial power too. Treaties were made on their behalf and, as shown above, they could make their own decisions. We can conclude on these grounds that *all Pskov* itself possessed political power without the magistrates' participation. Therefore, Pskovites had a special status enabling them to take part in *veche* meetings where political decisions could be made sometimes against the city magistrates' will. The latter were accountable before such meetings. Pskovites also held trials where magistrates could be judged. We should conclude from the above context that there was a special category of citizens with certain rights to lead judicial proceedings and to make political decisions in Pskov. As citizens were listed all those who lived within the Pskov city walls, *infra muros*. They were the Pskov citizens, *grazhane* (as the Pskov 2d Chronicle calls them), as opposed to the other inhabitants of the Pskov land.

According to Max Weber, such characteristics as the presence of citizens and a legal distinction between a citizen and non-citizen are not enough to identify a settlement as a city "im vollen Sinn des Wortes", i.e., a "commune". Thus Weber does not relate to the latter ancient polities or Indian cities, the population of which did not form a unity but was divided into various groups (phratries or casts). Belonging to such a group was primary for an individual, while belonging to the city

¹⁷ *Gramoty Velikogo Novgoroda i Pskova* [The Charters of Novgorod the Great and Pskov], 326-328.

population was secondary. Max Weber supposes that a commune is a unity of persons as individuals, their belonging to it is confirmed by an oath – and not by their origin, i.e., clan, family, tribe, etc.¹⁸ A commune is a union of equals whose oath (“coniuratio”) is a symbolic act of joining the commune. It appeared first as a form of the struggle of the citizens united by common interests against their seigneur. The main meaning of the word *coniuratio*, a “plot”, reminds us about this. As time passed, the originally homogeneous population of a commune started to differentiate, and the city social stratum of patricians came into existence and frequently usurped political power. Seats in the city councils often became occupied only by the members of certain patrician families.

We can see the same situation in Pskov. It is difficult to locate its origin because of the lack of sources prior to the early 14th century. Pskovites were united by their struggle against their seigneur – Novgorod the Great. Since the 13th century the Novgorod chronicles mention the contradictions between their city and Pskovites. The latter often refused to fulfill the orders of the former. Pskov was a town dependent on Novgorod at that time. Pskovites sought political freedom and religious independence, i.e., they were against magistrates sent by Novgorod and dependence on the Novgorod archbishop in ecclesiastic matters. In other words, they aimed for autonomy and autocephaly, i.e., according to Max Weber, the commune’s main goals. It was not later than the middle of the 14th century that Pskov received political freedom from Novgorod. But the Pskov Church remained subordinate to the Novgorod archbishop. Moreover, soon Pskov became politically dependent on Moscow. Being at first weak, this dependence grew increasingly stronger during the 15th century and finally led to the full subordination of Pskov to Moscow in 1510. So Pskov had always had its own seigneur. The common Pskovites’ aim was to maintain a certain degree of independence and a habitual mode of life expressed in the terms *starina* and *poshlina*, i.e., traditions and customs.

¹⁸ Max Weber, *Economy and society*, 1236 – 1240.

At the beginning of the 14th century, the time of the city extension and the appearance of the first detailed chronicles, the Pskov population, as reflected in the written sources, seems socially homogeneous: all social strata are missing. Since that time we find the phrase *all Pskov* which, as shown above, meant the unity of all Pskovites. The archeological sources confirm the evidence of the written ones. In the stratum of the early 14th century archeologists unearthed small houses of a special type which prevailed at that stage of the city's growth.¹⁹ It was in contrast to Novgorod big boyars' mansions. We do not know whether such social homogeneity was aboriginal or if it was the result of Pskov's conquest by the Livonian knights in the 1240s. But anyway, we may assume that the Pskov population was socially homogeneous in the early 14th century. Moreover, we have no grounds to believe that its population consisted of primary groups (like tribes, phratries, or casts). Quite the opposite, we can suggest that belonging to the category of Pskovites was based not on belonging to any tribe, family, clan, etc. It was defined by the fact, as shown above, of living *infra muros*, i.e., inside the walls.

The social differentiation appears later with the city's growth in the 14th and 15th centuries. Thus, from the mid-14th through the mid-15th centuries, *posadnik*, which at first was a lifelong position of the city magistrate, turned into the city patrician group. Only a member of such a *posadnik* family could become a city magistrate. Boyars had been mentioned since the 15th century. By the middle of the 15th century, the Pskov population was divided into two social groups: "the well-doing people" (*dobrye liudi*) and "black people" (*chernye liudi*), i.e., into the upper and lower strata of burghers. As a result, the social differentiation led to social disagreement in a once-united commune.

Thus, we can see that *all Pskov* possessed almost all the features of European communes, except for taking an oath (*coniuratio*) to confirm joining the commune. At the same time we are aware of the mutual procedure of kissing the cross

¹⁹ G.V. Borisevich. "O derevjannom zodchestve Pskova" ["On Pskov's Wooden Architecture"], *Arkheplogiia i istoriia Pskova i Pskovskoi zemli* [Archeology and History of Pskov and the Pskov Land] (Pskov, 1982), 23; K. M. Plotkin, "Kontsy Pskova na nachal'nom etape slozheniya gorodskoi territorii" ["Pskov's Quarters at the Initial Stage of the City Territory's Formation"], *Drevnij Pskov. Issledovaiija srednevekovogo goroda* [Old Pskov. Studies of a Medieval City]. (Saint Petersburg, 1994), 32.

by Pskovites, i.e., their oath to the magistrates and vice versa, by magistrates to Pskovites. It took place “*na veche*”, which is the key term to understand the Pskov political system.

The term “*na veche*” (i.e., at the assembly meeting) is accompanied by the terms *all Pskov* or *all Pskovites* in all cases known to us. *Veche* should be understood as a certain ceremony accompanying the procedure of making political decisions or adopting legislation. *Veche* was an indispensable condition of any political act relating to the gain or loss of power. Since the mid-15th century, the chronicles are full of examples of how princes *kissed the cross to all Pskov at veche*. Inauguration of a prince was not complete without this action, as we can see in the example of Prince Repnia-Obolenskii. He did not pass such a procedure at *veche*, and that is why he was not accepted by Pskovites as a prince and finally was expelled by them from the city.

Veche was the condition not only of the beginning but also of the end of the Pskov princes' authority. If it was due to a prince's will he declared it at *veche*. Thus, Alexander Chartoryiskii *bade farewell at the veche*: “*I am not your prince any more, there is no my oath to you and yours to me.*”²⁰

As we can see in the last example, not only princes took an oath to Pskovites at *veche* but Pskovites took it too. It is the same procedure that we see in the *coniuratio*.

We do not attempt to prove that the *veche* and the *coniuratio* had the same meaning. On the contrary, we believe that these were different procedures, but of the same nature. The analogue of the *veche* can be found rather in the North German Burding. Pskovites formed the unity – *all Pskov* or the entire political body at *veche*. The *veche* and the *coniuratio* are different aspects of the same phenomenon, i.e., the formation of medieval urban political culture similar both in Pskov in the 14th and the 15th centuries and in the cities of the Latin world in the early communal period (11th to 13th centuries). The end was different. The Western communes, being united and representing significant power, could often resist pressure

²⁰ *Pskovskije letopisi* [The Pskov Chronicles], 1: 58.

from the outside. Later they gradually became the part of modern states, having kept many of their privileges until the 18th century. In Russia, Pskov and Novgorod, where the communes were still in their initial phase, were left face-to-face with the growing Muscovite state and were absorbed by it. The processes that took place in Pskov in the 14th and 15th centuries are typologically similar to those in the cities of the Latin world in the early phase of the communal period.

3. The absence of a special city law in Pskov is another argument we aim to test. It is obvious that the Pskov Judicial Charter can not be considered a judicial text of this type. Its legal norms certainly spread over the whole Pskov land. But we should remember that *Stadtrecht* did not appear out of nowhere in North Germany either. It originated from *Landrecht* only in the 13th century, at the end of the early communal period. We can find the shoots of city law in the Pskov Judicial Charter already. For example, it fixes a special status of a city territory:

Art. 7. *And execute the person who steals from the Kremlin [fortress]²¹; the horse thief; the traitor; and the arsonist.*

Art. 8. *If something is stolen in the suburb [but not from the fortress], then [as many as] two times spare [the thief], [and,] having convicted him, punish him according to his guilt; but if [a thief] is convicted a third time, deprive him of his life just like the fortress thief.²²*

Thus, if we take into account a diachronic similarity between Pskov in the 14th and the 15th centuries and the cities of the Latin world in their early communal period, the picture will become clear. The city law was still to mature, to be separated from the common *Landrecht*. There are a number of similar features in both the Pskov Judicial Charter and the North German city codices. First of all, these documents were granted by princely or royal power. The fact that the legislation of

²¹ The opposition between the Kremlin (fortress – the core city part), on the one hand, and a suburb, i.e. a city territory outside the walls, on the other, is strange because it fails to mention other city parts. It cannot be explained but by an assumption that the legal norm contained in the articles 7 and 8 appeared in the times when there was no difference between the territory of the city and its fortress.

²² *Pskovskaja Sudnaja Gramota. Text. Kommentarii. Issledovanie*. [The Pskov Judicial Charter. Text. Commentary. Investigation], 37.

both the North German cities and Pskov is based on the authority of a prince who granted corresponding rights and privileges is more important than the origin of each norm itself. Let us note that such an appeal to the monarchs' authority is characteristic only for the North German city law and the Pskov Judicial Charter. The Italian city statutes, being based on the privileges granted by a seigneur, appealed to the people's will and to the authority of Roman law.²³

4. We cannot agree with the statement of Professor Steindorf that there was no council in Novgorod. Steindorff asserts that *veche* cannot be considered a council. The *veche* included all the free citizens, while the council in the communal cities consisted of narrow circle of patrician clan representatives. The fact that Steindorf compares council to *veche* seems to be connected with his other observation that the Latin term "concilium" was translated into Slavic as *općina* in Dalmatian sources. However, the Dalmatian usage cannot be extended to Novgorod. The Novgorod *veche* as well as the Pskov one cannot be interpreted as a city council. We should rather look for its analogue in the North German *Burding*. But this issue is beyond the scope of the present paper. Meanwhile, a long historiographical tradition claims that a boyar council was as the main government body in Novgorod and Pskov. As for Novgorod, it cannot be denied that there was such a council as a "closed" institution to which only the representatives of a narrow circle of boyar clans were admitted. But the situation in Pskov was different. There is no mention of such a council in the Pskov sources. This fact can be explained by the archaic character of Pskov political culture in comparison not only with its contemporaries in the West but also with Novgorod. We have already said above that it is only in the 15th century that social differentiation can be found in Pskov. Such differentiation must be seen as a *conditio sine qua non* for the formation of a patrician council. This process started earlier in Novgorod, where already in the 13th century we find powerful boyar clans – for example, the Mishkinichi, who gave a number of important politicians to Novgorod. We can be sure that there was a patrician circle

²³ G. Chittolini, "Statuti e autonomie urbane", *Statuti città' territori in Italia e Germania tra Medioevo ed eta' Moderna* (Bologna, 1991), 7 – 47.

(they were called *posadniki* here) only since the middle of the 15th century. It was due to its archaic political culture that Pskov did not have a council similar to that of the Latin world's communes. There had been all the premises for its appearing by the end of the independence period but the council itself had no time to appear.

So having tested the arguments put forward by Professor Steindorff, we come to the conclusion that, contrary to his opinion, there are good reasons to accept the existence of a commune in Pskov. Of course, the process of commune formation was only in its initial stage in Pskov, corresponding to the early communal period in the Latin world. It was the Muscovite occupation that prevented the further development of Pskov's city commune.