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DO WE KNOW THE COMPOSITION OF THE 18TH CENTURY RUSSIAN SOCIETY?¹

At first sight, eighteenth-century Russian society and its social structure seem to be a thoroughly studied field, with numerous books and articles on government policies and on certain social classes – nobility, clergy, townspeople, functionaries, peasants, and the Cossacks. These were the classes recognized by the Russian state, which in the eighteenth century made every effort to transform them into European-style judicial estates and to construct a social framework based on legislation created specifically for this purpose. It is only natural that from the nineteenth century on, most historians mistook these estates for historic reality, took it for granted that they had constituted “Russian society,” and focused their research on studying them. The findings of several generations of historians were first summed up by Boris Mironov in the two volumes of his *Social History of Imperial Russia, 1700-1917*² and later in a huge volume entitled *Soslovnoe obshchestvo Rossiiskoi imperii*.³ However, long before that Elise Wirtschafter made us doubt the extent of our knowledge and question the existence of the estates that the government was

1. The study was carried out in the framework of the Basic Research Program at the National Research University, Higher School of Economics in 2014.

2. Boris N. Mironov, *A Social History of Imperial Russia, 1700-1917*, Vol. 1-2. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000).

3. Natalia A. Ivanova, Valentina P. Zheltova, *Soslovnoe obshchestvo Rossiiskoi imperii, XVIII-nachalo XX veka* (M.: Novyi Khronograf, 2009).

constructing. In her book on “people of various ranks,”⁴ Wirtschafter showed that there had been a contradiction of sorts between government policies and the trends of social and economic development. All the government’s attempts to set up a well-defined social structure, wherein every subject of the tsar was a member of a particular judicial estate, ended in failure. Wirtschafter even wrote of

the lack of structure that encouraged voluntaristic self-definition in society and arbitrariness in government, that permitted the re-creation of social categories as politicocultural concepts, and that transformed socio-cultural constructs into sociological facts.⁵

Or, as she put it 15 years later, the “legally defined categories of Russian Imperial society did not necessarily correspond to social and economic facts.”⁶ Wirtschafter also demonstrated the existence of various marginal groups that belonged to none of the legal estates, but rather, “occupied ambiguous outsider statuses within a social framework constantly redefined by an activist state.” This citation comes from the preface to Wirtschafter’s book on social identity in Imperial Russia. The scholar also mentions here that initially, she found inspiration in the “‘new social history’ with its emphasis on measuring socioeconomic realities and writing ‘history from below’.” Later on, she realized that historical records were in large measure government-produced, which led her to switch her attention to the history of social and political language.⁷

An attentive reader of Wirtschafter’s books is compelled to question at least two other things: first, whether the range of social mobility was, in fact, as restricted as we usually think; and second, whether interactions between different social groups were really organized in the way we believe they were, given that our beliefs are based mostly on classic nineteenth-century Russian literary fiction, rather than primary sources.

The problem of intergroup interactions brings us to the issue raised by Michael Confino in 1983. His analysis of Russian social history and historiography of the 1890s–1920s made him suggest studying Russia as an integrated social body, rather than an assortment of isolated groups.⁸ In a recent reference to Confino’s suggestion David Ransel argued, “scholars have found it difficult to integrate and analyze the interactions between people of different social statuses” due to the way Russia was ruled and to the organization of its archives. Indeed, the Russian government

4. Elise Kimerling Wirtschafter, *Structures of Society: Imperial Russia’s ‘People of various ranks’* (Northern Illinois Univ. Press, 1994).

5. *Ibid.*, 148.

6. Elise K. Wirtschafter, “Social Categories in Russian Imperial History,” *Cahiers du Monde russe*, 50, 1 (Janvier-mars 2009): 241.

7. Elise Kimerling Wirtschafter, *Social Identity in Imperial Russia* (Northern Illinois Univ. Press, 1997).

8. Michael Confino, “Issues and Nonissues in Russian Social History and Historiography, 1890s–1920s,” *Occasional paper, Kennan Institute for the Advanced Russian Studies*, 165 (1983).

was long accustomed to dealing differently with different social groups. According to Nancy Kollmann, in Muscovy “[the] groups identified by social class, ethnicity, region or religion were governed according to a combination of local customs and overarching imperial law”.⁹ They were also subject to different government institutions. An administrative reform by Peter the Great changed the situation somewhat, but even in the late nineteenth century, it remained the case that

every person in the Russian Empire ought to belong to one of the estates and religious groups. From the state’s point of view, it was a confession or an estate that defined one’s identity.¹⁰

That is why David Ransel suggested that historians should turn to sources like Ivan Tolchénov’s diary, as this

offers a way around the barriers posed by this structure of preserved knowledge [...] and allows us to understand and analyze the shared cultural and social practices that held Russia together and gave meaning to its collective life.¹¹

Prior to that, Nancy Kollmann had analyzed one of these practices as part of her research into the role of honor and dishonor and concluded,

The Muscovite state seems to have used honor as one of many mechanisms to promote a vision and reality of social cohesion.¹²

Most of the arguments cited above were repeated once again in articles by Confino, Wirtschafter, and Ransel published in the *Cahiers du Monde russe* in 2008-2010. Confino argued that the soslovie/estate paradigm is not particularly effective because each of the legal estates consisted of many social groups that were often in conflict with each other. At the same time he suggested that there is no alternative but to accept the term *soslovie* because of its established position in the literature.¹³ Wirtschafter in her turn again repeated that

because of the mass illiteracy that persisted for much of the history of Imperial Russia, social historians have been forced to rely on the legal-administrative

9. Nancy S. Kollmann, *Crime and Punishment in Early Modern Russia* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 110.

10. Andreas Kappeler, “Perepisi naseleniia v Rossii i Avstro-Vengrii kak imperskie proekty,” *Ab Imperio*, 4 (2012): 95.

11. David Ransel, *A Russian Merchant’s Tale: The Life and Adventures of Ivan Alekseevich Tolchenov, Based on His Diary* (Indiana Univ. Press, Bloomington, 2009), xii.

12. Nancy S. Kollmann, *By Honor Bound: State and Society in Early Modern Russia* (Cornell Univ. Press, 1999), 249.

13. Michael Confino, “The Soslovie (estate) Paradigm. Reflections on some open questions,” *Cahiers du Monde russe*, 49, 4 (2008): 681-704.

records of the bureaucracy and/or the letters, memoirs, scholarship, literary works, and journalistic accounts of the educated classes. For historians, sources are everything, and while the collapse of the Soviet Union has produced greater archival access, the parish, estate, and local government records that promise to provide new information are often fragmentary and geographically limited. Still, as researchers continue to investigate these records, and as they apply innovative theoretical perspectives such as those being developed in environmental and regional history, they are likely to discover new answers to longstanding problems.

More so

it has become clear that in order to understand the structure(s) of a society, it is necessary to examine the language, categories, and concepts employed by contemporaries to describe themselves and their surroundings. Indeed, even if the self-representations of individuals and communities are less objectively accurate than the statistical methods and “scientific” accounts of present-day researchers, they still bear a closer relationship to the behavior, actions, and attitudes of actual historical actors. More often than not, in real historical time, their representations and (mis)understandings constituted the basis for individual and group responses to concrete conditions.¹⁴

David Ransel also agreed that «only at the micro level can we observe the social relations and “going concerns” that constituted a community».¹⁵ But what about Russian historians?

While Elise Wirtschafter had to compromise in the writing of a Russian “history from below,” her Russian colleagues did not even try to write one. Based on solid Marxist foundations, Soviet historiography considered social history to be essentially a history of “class struggle,” while the existence of classes raised no doubts. When in the early 1990s Russian historians attempted to catch up with Western historical scholarship, the “new social history” was already out of fashion. In their eagerness to study “scenarios of power” and to research history of daily and private life, gender history, micro-history, etc., many Russian scholars failed to realize that most of these histories had developed from the “new social history” they had never even heard of. The period, when the “new social history” had been the mainstream approach, was, in fact, missed by Russian historians, who were at the time still confined within an exclusively “Marxist” methodology. This is mostly true for Russian students of domestic history: our colleagues in the field of European history were, in fact, aware of what their Western counterparts were doing and tried using their approaches. It was from Europeanists that

14. Wirtschafter, *Social Categories in Russian Imperial History*, 232, 249.

15. David L. Ransel, «Implicit Questions in Michael Confino’s Essay. Corporate State and Vertical Relationships,” *Cahiers du Monde russe*, 51, 2-3 (2010): 203.

Russian historians of Russia first heard of the “new social history”; alas, the news came too late.¹⁶

At the same time, Russian specialists in the history of eighteenth-century Russia have recently drawn scholarly attention to previously ignored social groups, such as criminals and the disabled, the first inhabitants of Saint-Petersburg, as well as soldiers’ wives and children.¹⁷ Again, however, these social categories were studied mostly as isolated groups. Interactions between these and other groups in the population, together with their members’ self-identification, have yet to be explored as clues to the real social structure.

Elise Wirtshafter is certainly right in that most primary sources available to a historian are products of the government, while sources like Ivan Tolchënov’s diary, studied by David Ransel, are few and far in between. Yet, are sources really so scarce, and is it indeed impossible to write imperial Russia’s “new social history” “from below,” as it were?

This article seeks to draw attention to the sources not yet studied from this point of view. The fragments of information culled from these sources could help to solve the puzzle of early modern Russian society.

I first encountered these sources when I decided to continue my exploration of daily life in provincial Russian towns of the eighteenth century, once again based on documents from the municipal magistracy of the town of Bezhet’sk¹⁸. This time, I chose to concentrate on its economic aspects. While looking for sources, I came upon the so-called books of protested promissory notes (*knigi protesta vekselei*), well known to students of the economic history of eighteenth-century Russia.¹⁹

Promissory notes are believed to have first made their appearance in Russia under Peter the Great, but special legislation to regulate their usage — the Statute on Promissory Notes (*Ustav veksel’nyi*²⁰) — came into being no sooner than 1729 and remained in effect until 1832. The Statute included instructions on how to

16. See for instance: Lorina P. Repina, “Novaia istoricheskaiia nauka” i sotsial’naia istoriia (M., 1998); Pavel Iu. Uvarov, *Frantsiia XVI veka: Opyt rekonstruktsii po notarial’nym aktam* (M., 2004), esp. 23-69. Pavel Uvarov is the most active proponent of the “new social history” in today’s Russia. One of his recent public lectures is entitled, *The Revenge of Social History* (<http://www.polit.ru/article/2010/03/23/history/>).

17. Evgenii V. Akeliev, *Povsednevnaia zhizn’ vorovskogo mira Moskvy vo vremena Van’i Kaina* (M., 2012); Natalia V. Kozlova, *Liudi driakhlye, bol’nye, ubogie v Moskve XVIII veka* (M., 2010); Olga E. Kosheleva, *Liudi Sankt-Peterburgskogo ostrova Petrovskogo vremeni* (M., 2004); Pavel P. Scherbinin, *Voennyi faktor v povsednevnoi zhizni russkoi zhenshiny v XVIII – nachale XX v.* (Tambov, 2004), esp. Chapter 1.

18. The first part of the project: Aleksander B. Kamenskii, *Povsednevnost’ russkikh gorodskikh obivatelei: Istoricheskie anekdoty iz provintsial’noi zhizni XVIII veka* (M., 2006.)

19. George Munro, “Finance and Credit in the Eighteenth-Century Russian Economy,” *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, XLV, 4 (1987): 552-560; Idem, “The Role of the Veksel’ in Russian Capital Formation: A Preliminary Inquiry,” in R.P. Bartlett, A.G. Cross and Karen Rasmussen, eds., *Russia and the World of the Eighteenth Century* (Columbus, OH: Slavica Publishers, Inc., 1988); Idem, “St. Petersburg’s Bills of Exchange in the Russian Economy of the Eighteenth Century,” *Research in Maritime History*, 3 (December 1992): 99-113.

20. *Polnoe Sobranie Zakonov Rossiiskoi Imperii*, Sant-Petersburg (hereafter PSZ), 1830. Vol. VIII, № 5410.

compose promissory notes and what their form and content should be. As legal documents, promissory notes are unique in that they were not registered at any governmental office and were not necessarily composed by government officials or scribes, as was usually done with all other kinds of documents, including petitions.²¹ According to the Statute, no witnesses or guarantees were required for a promissory note to be valid. Promissory notes were mostly drawn up by their immediate issuers who, as stipulated by the Statute, had to identify themselves in the same manner as they would in any other legal documents, i.e. by indicating their rank, social position, and place of residence. Needless to say, should both the creditor and the debtor be illiterate, they had no choice but to ask someone for assistance. But in contrast to other documents of the period, the scribe did not have to sign his name. This means that any personal details found in promissory notes are, in fact, an issuer's self-identification.

We have almost no original promissory notes at our disposal, as they were usually destroyed upon payment. Fortunately, numerous copies of promissory notes survived in the books of protests kept, according to the 1729 Statute, at various governmental institutions whose functions included resolving arguments related to monetary instruments, locating defaulters, and in cases of bankruptcy, liquidating debtors' assets at an auction.

The archival collection of the Bezhetsk magistracy in the Russian State Archives of Ancient Acts contains 25 books of protested promissory notes for the period from 1740 to 1775.²² It appears that prior to that period, no such registries were kept in Bezhetsk, but this certainly does not mean that townspeople had not completed transactions, lent each other money or complained to the magistrate about the borrowers who failed to repay loans on time. They did so even before promissory notes (*vekselia*) made their first appearance in Russia: these transactions were recorded in letters of credit (*zaemnye pis'ma*) or bond indenture notes (*kabal'nye zapisi*). A number of such cases survived in the archive of the Bezhetsk magistrate. Overall, this archive yielded information on 2,448 credit transactions completed over the period from 1696 to 1775.

This number may seem large, but George Munro indicated that in Saint Petersburg, about 4,000 promissory notes were registered in the year 1773 alone.²³ The Bezhetsk book of protests for the same year contains only 166 entries: 25 times fewer than in Saint Petersburg. But then, Saint Petersburg was a sea port, and 962

21. The *ukazy* of 1699 and 1701 forbade the writing down of all documents known in the Russian source studies as the *chastno-pravovye akty* [private-law acts], including testimonies, in one's own hand (*svoeruchno*). The prohibition was later lifted, but documents of this nature were still to be registered with the authorities and signed by witnesses. See: Natalia V. Kozlova. *Gorodskaiia semia XVIII veka: Semeino-Pravovye Akty Kuptsov i Raznochintsev Moskv* (M., 2002), 17-18.

22. RGADA (Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv drevneishikh aktov – The Russian State Archives of Ancient Acts) f. 709. (Bezhetskaia ratusha i gorodovoi magistrat), op. 1. Nos. 69, 98, 124, 152, 181, 217, 262, 312, 367, 414, 445, 493, 580; op. 2, d. 622, 636, 798, 870, 902, 962, 998, 1032, 1107, 1135, 1169, 1190.

23. Munro, *Finance and Credit*.

of all the 4,000 promissory notes registered there in the year 1773 were composed by foreign merchants.²⁴ Considering that the population of Saint Petersburg was approximately 60 times larger than that of Bezhetsk, it is safe to suggest that the latter was quite active economically.

Transactions reflected in promissory notes involved people of all social groups. These sources, therefore, supply information on at least one — yet very important — aspect of interactions between these groups. Since the magistrate was a governmental institution in charge of the urban population, it is natural that the majority of lending transactions recorded in the magistrate's archive took place between townspeople. The residents of Bezhetsk, both men and women, used credit in commercial operations or simply borrowed cash from each other. Yet, 37% of all registered transactions involved representatives of other social groups: gentry, ecclesiastics, clerks, people of various ranks (*raznochintsy*), and peasants. (See Table 1).²⁵

Table 1

Social group	Number of cases	Percentage to the total number of promissory notes	Average sum transacted
Peasants	332	13,5%	15,8 rub.
Gentry	289	11,8%	175,4 rub.
Government officials and people of various ranks	169	6,9%	37,4 rub.
Clergy	111	4,5%	14,5 rub.

As the table shows, it was with gentry and peasants that the Bezhetsk town dwellers interacted the most. The reason for that is obvious: the town of Bezhetsk was situated in the agrarian area of central Russia, in proximity to numerous privately owned and monastic estates. Few government officials resided in town permanently. One may suggest that for another region, the results could be different.

The Bezhetsk collection of promissory notes reveals a lot about interactions between all four social groups and, therefore, deserves a special study. Here, I will give just a few examples.

24. Vladimir N. Zakharov, "Rol' zapadnoevropeiskikh kuptsov v razvitii kredita v Rossii XVIII v.," *Diffusiia evropeiskikh innovatsii v Rossiiskoi imperii* (Ekaterinburg, 2009), 230.

25. The social groups included into Table 1 are constructed on the basis of their self-identification. Government officials here are members of the urban population who occupied lower positions in various local offices and did not belong to the gentry. Their legal status was mostly the same as that of *raznochintsy*.

George Munro pointed out that

peasants were explicitly forbidden to make use of notes, a prohibition that apparently was honored only in the breach, to judge from the number of times it was repeated in subsequent years.²⁶

In fact, although the 1729 Statute did not mention peasants at all, their use of promissory notes was no less active than that of other social groups. The Principal Magistrate lobbied for such a prohibition in 1749, but the Senate rejected it by referring to article 38 of the Statute, which listed all social groups allowed to use notes, including people of various ranks.²⁷ Even so, two years later the palace (*dvortsovye*) peasants were banned from issuing promissory notes; it was only in 1761 that the prohibition was extended to include all other categories of peasants.²⁸ Nevertheless, in the Bezhetsk collection, 17 promissory notes with peasants as a party to the transaction date from the years 1762 to 1774. There is one thing that differentiates these 17 cases from their earlier counterparts: out of the 332 transactions involving peasants, only 10 have peasants lending money, rather than borrowing it, and nine of these cases belong to the period after 1761. This is probably because peasants were not allowed to issue promissory notes, but could well accept them. At the same time, one of the promissory notes shows that there was a way to circumvent the legal prohibition: this adds one more aspect to interactions between social groups. In 1774 second major Vasilii Opochinin, a land owner from the Uglich region, gave a loan of 400 rubles to an Uglich merchant Grigorii Filippovskii. The promissory note contained an additional commentary: the loan was to be paid back by a peasant Grigorii Oreshnikov, a serf of count Petr Borisovich Sheremetev.²⁹ Thus, a merchant obviously served as an intermediary in a deal between a nobleman and a wealthy privately owned peasant who could not sign the promissory note for himself.

The documents of the Bezhetsk collection reveal an intense interaction between local town dwellers and peasants, as about 90 townspeople protested promissory notes issued by peasants, with two individuals protesting notes more than 20 times each. Unfortunately, in the majority of cases we do not know the purpose of these loans. One may suppose that peasants paid for something they had bought from the townspeople, or that they received advance payment for the produce they were to supply. Of course, their interactions were not limited to trade operations. For instance, in 1759 a group of 29 palace-owned peasants represented by their elder borrowed 20 rubles from a Bezhetsk merchant Aleksei Burkov, promising to pay them back in 8 months. Thus, each peasant borrowed about 69 kopecks, which

26. Munro, *Finance and Credit*, 558.

27. PSZ, Vol. XIII, № 9587, 25-26.

28. Ibid., № 9832, p. 400; Vol. XV, № 11204.

29. RGADA, f. 709, op. 1, No. 535, fol. 64.

more or less equaled the amount of the poll tax they had to pay that year.³⁰ The choice of Burkov as a creditor was not accidental, as he was one of the two earlier mentioned townsmen who were most active in lending money to peasants. If my guess about the purpose of this loan is correct, we find here a very interesting aspect of interactions between the two social groups.

The purpose of another loan is clear. In 1770 a local landowner Prokopii Fomin borrowed 550 rubles from the Bezhetsk merchant Mikhail Reviakin. In his promissory note he explained that he “has borrowed it for buying the village of Pechkovo with peasants from the Bezhetsk magistracy.”³¹ While Aleksei Burkov actively loaned money to peasants, Mikhail Reviakin did the same for noblemen by regularly advancing them large sums. For instance, in 1755 he lent 400 rubles to Vera Sokolénova, the widow of an army major from the Uglich region; in 1761, 200 rubles to second lieutenant Ivan Baturin; in 1763, 200 rubles to Tatiana Molchanova, the widow of a government official; in 1769, 80 rubles to second lieutenant Ivan Voslenov; in 1770, 600 rubles to Anna Berseneva, the widow of an army captain; in 1772, 150 rubles to retired colonel Ivan Ushakov, etc. It is worth noting that Reviakin’s clientele was not limited to local landowners from the Bezhetsk region, but also included gentry from adjacent territories.

It is not surprising that, as Table 1 shows, the average amount of money transacted in promissory notes involving members of the nobility is 10 times larger than that in the peasant group. Two more things distinguish the gentry group. Among peasants, we find no female participants in promissory-note transactions; however, 71 (24.5%) out of the 289 promissory notes list a noble woman as a party, with only 14 of them being widows. In addition, noblemen did not just borrow money (200 cases), they also loaned cash (89 cases). Once again, 35% of the noble-born creditors were women.

Most of the time, noblemen identified themselves in the promissory notes in a proper way by supplying their rank (even if they were retired) and sometimes additional status-related information, such as “a landowner” (*pomeshchik*) or “a nobleman” (*dворянин*). Still, in 14 cases noblemen did not provide their rank: instead, they identified themselves simply as “landowners” or “noblemen.” In one case, the self-identification of choice is “a minor” (*nedorosl'*), which is understandable, as the document stems from 1747 and predates Peter’s III *Manifesto on the Liberation of the Nobility*. At the time, *nedorosl'* was still an official name for noble youths, not yet enlisted into military or civil service. Even so, not everything is clear as far as ranks are concerned. Most of the military men in the Bezhetsk collection ranked between the 14th and the 6th classes of the Table of Ranks, which suggests that residents of provincial Bezhetsk did not have dealings with the higher-ranking gentry or aristocracy. There are, however, two military ranks that defy identification according to the Table of Ranks: these are the *inzhenier-praporshchik* and the

30. The poll tax for 1758 was lower than usual by 8 kop. (See: Sergei M. Troitskii, *Finansovaia politika russkogo absolutizma v XVIII veke* [M., 1966], 142).

31. RGADA, f. 709, op. 1, No. 367, fol. 55.

palitsevyi oboznyi. These titles are missing even from the most recent reference book on military and civil ranks in Imperial Russia.³²

As for the civil rank-holders, there is a riddle here as well: one individual identified himself as a “landowner” and a “stable-man” (*pomeshchik i stremiannoi koniukh*). The Dictionary of the Russian Academy defined *stremiannoi koniukh* as a servant who assisted his master at hunting.³³ One may assume that a nobleman with this self-identification (he signed two promissory notes in the same manner) served at the Imperial court, but had that been the case, he certainly would have said so. Moreover, although this rank had existed at the court in Muscovy, it probably disappeared after the reforms of Peter the Great—and yet the two promissory notes in the Bezhetetsk collection date to 1760.

Several unusual self-identifications, which do not give a clue as to the social positions of their bearers, are also found among the promissory notes composed by government officials and people of various ranks. These are an archivist of the Court Stables Chancellery (*archivarius pridvornoi koniushennoi kantseliarii*), a measurer of the linen (*kholstomer*) in the Petersburg customs office, an Imperial court cellar attendant (*pridvornyi pogrebnoi sluzhitelj*), and a general apprentice of the Admiralty (*admiralteiskogo vedeniia general'noe podmaster'e*).

The most interesting case is that of an attorney of the land (*zemskii poverennii*). Attorneys (*poverennnye*) were known in Russia from the 15th century, mostly in the North, where they usually represented free peasants.³⁴ The phrase *zemskii poverennii* was widely used in the 19th century after the abolition of serfdom. However, the man who identified himself in this manner in the eighteenth-century Bezhetetsk collection of promissory notes represented a privately owned village. His legal status was most probably that of a peasant, even a serf, but he preferred an identification that highlighted his special position. The same usually happened with townspeople elected to any positions in the municipal administration. They very often omitted their official identification as merchants, preferring rather to indicate the position in public service that they occupied at the time when a promissory note was drawn up.

As is well known, the social category of clergy (*tserkovniki*) included not only those who actually served in churches, but also their family members. It is therefore only natural that in the Bezhetetsk collection of promissory notes we find several sons and widows of priests and deacons. One man identified himself as a deacon's son or brother-in-law (*d'iachkov ziat'*). It would not be surprising had he been a peasant, as sons-in-law were often included in peasant families. But this is not the case

32. See: *Gosudarstvennost' Rossii, Slovar'-Spravochnik*, Book 5 “Polzhnosti, chiny, zvaniia, tituly i tserkovnye sany Rossii, konets XV veka – fevral' 1917 goda,” Parts 1, 2 (M., 2005). The book mentions engineers, captains, majors, colonels and generals, but not ensigns. The rank of *oboznyi* existed in the seventeenth-century Polish army. By the eighteenth century it became an honorary title. Usually, there were only two of these for the whole army, and they were appointed by the hetman personally.

33. *Slovar' Akademii Rossiiskoi, 1789-1794* (M., 2005), Vol. 5, col. 872.

34. See Vasilii Kliuchevskii's Lecture Course in Russian History, lecture L.

here: it is obvious that such self-identification did not match his legal social status. The man who identified himself in this manner borrowed 5 rubles from a wealthy and respectable townsman in 1757. The creditor probably knew the borrower personally, and there is no doubt that, whatever his actual legal status, he was known in the community as a *d'iachkov ziat'*.

Peasant self-identification presents is the least problematic. All four categories of peasants — state-owned, palace-owned, monastic, and private — are represented in the Bezhet'sk collection. At the same time, over 16% of peasants did not mention the category they belonged to at all. Also, a number of people, whose legal status was probably that of peasant, preferred a different self-identification. For instance, 12 promissory notes identify borrowers as monastic servants (*slugi monastyrskie*). The most recent Russian reference book asserts that in the seventeenth century, *slugi monastyrskie* was a collective name for all kinds of managers on the monastic manors, and that this social category disappeared in 1719, when *slugi monastyrskie* were registered as peasants obligated to pay the capitation. The book also asserts that *slugi monastyrskie* was synonymous with the word *sluzhka*.³⁵ It is, however, quite obvious, that even upon registration as peasants these people did not lose their jobs. Moreover, the twelve promissory notes in question all stem from the period between 1740-1773, which means that they cover the time even after 1764, when the manors they worked for ceased to be monastic and were subjected to the College of Economy instead. One of the authors of these twelve promissory notes identified himself as an administrator (*upravitel'*), seven as servicemen (*sluzhiteli*), two as servants (*slugi*), and two as monastic servants (*sluzhki*). The eighteenth-century Dictionary of the Russian Academy explains that *sluzhiteli* and *slugi* could be either serfs or freemen, and only the *sluzhki* were usually serfs.³⁶ Nevertheless, the authors of promissory notes certainly did not use these words as synonyms, as they were aware of differences between them. This also means that the real legal status of these twelve individuals cannot be established with certainty and that it most likely was ambiguous.

This is not all. The name “servicemen” (*sluzhiteli*) was used to denote not only monastic or economic manor administrators, but also those who managed noblemen's houses and estates. Were all of them serfs, or *dvorovye*? Not at all. The author of a promissory note dated 1761 identified himself as “Mikhail Filatov, a serviceman in the house of lieutenant Alexander Volodimerovich Narbekov and the Solikamsk merchant” (*Domu gospodina poruchika Aleksandra Volodimerovicha Narbekova sluzhitel' i Soli Kamskoi kupets Mikhaila Filatova*). There is no reason to believe that he was unique: it is quite probable that other people in a similar position simply omitted their legal status when composing promissory notes and named only their job title instead. Once again, this shows that, as far as self-identification is concerned, it was not only gentry who held their ranks dear. Townspeople and even

35. *Gosudarstvennost' Rossii*, Book 5, Part. 2, 315.

36. *Slovar' Akademii Rossiiskoi 1789-1794*, Vol. 5, col. 554, 552.

peasants also valued the positions they occupied more than their legal status, or at least considered them more important.

Another social group with an ambiguous legal status consists of retired military men from the lower ranks and members of their families. There is no need to dwell on this for long, as Elise Wirtschafter studied this group in detail. I will only mention one promissory note issued by a soldier's son who found it necessary to add to this identification that he was "a resident of the town of Bezhetsk" (*soldatskii syn i goroda Bezhetskago zhitel'*). The words *zhitel'* or *zhilitsa* (for women) are found in 26 other promissory notes. These people named various towns and villages, sometimes monastic villages, as their places of residence. Most of their promissory notes were signed in locations other than their regular places of residence, which indicates that these individuals were engaged in an economic activity. They were most likely not registered as merchants in the towns or peasants in the villages, so what then was their actual legal status? Were they obligated to pay the capitation tax?

The same question may be asked of four other men from the Bezhetsk collection. One of them identified himself as "a servant's son" (*sluzhnyi syn*), another as "an assistant" (*pomoshchnik*), the third as "a shop assistant" (*sidelets v lavke*), and the fourth as "a master's man" (*gospodskii chelovek* — in this case most probably *dvorovyi*). In 1771, a Bezhetsk merchant Iakov Brudastov lent 30 rubles to a person with the ordinary Russian name of Stepan Vasiliev. Vasiliev identified himself as "a natural gypsy who had registered himself with the Uglich landowner second lieutenant Nikolai Nilov and as an estate manager" (*prirodnoi tsygan, zapisavshisia za uglichtskogo pomeshchika podporuchika Nikolaia Nilova, burmistr Stepan Vasiliev*).³⁷ As an estate manager, why did this man feel the need to add information about his ethnic background?

A nice illustration of an ambiguous identity is the story of a certain Andrei Zagadashnikov, a resident of the town of Bezhetsk. The man was registered as a townsman and a merchant of Bezhetsk both in the 2nd and 3rd surveys of 1747 and 1763. Since neither his name, nor those of his kin occur on any earlier lists of Bezhetsk residents, it is most likely that Andrei married the daughter of a Bezhetsk merchant some time around 1746. According to the 1763 survey, by that time he was 38 years old and already a widower. Fifty-two promissory notes with Zagadashnikov as a borrower or creditor survived in the Bezhetsk collection. He owned a store (*lavka*) in town and was economically rather active. The man had four brothers who lived in the Bezhetsk Makar'evskii suburb (*sloboda*) — first monastic and later economic settlement. All the documents of the Bezhetsk magistrate identify the brothers not as peasants, but as residents — *zhiteli*. The four brothers actively participated in Andrei's business, and in 1760 one of them was elected a warden (*tseloval'nik*). Another brother was in 1771 imprisoned as a defaulted borrower who could not pay back his debts.³⁸

37. RGADA, f. 709, op. 1, No. 445, fol. 14.

38. Kamenskii, *Povsednevnost' russkikh gorodskikh obivatelei*, 181-182, 232, 266.

Andrei seems to have been quite a respectable man. In 1759, the townspeople of Bezhet'sk entrusted him with a very unusual mission: he was to travel to the city of Novgorod and to apply to the local archbishop, asking him to return to Bezhet'sk the priest of one of the town churches.³⁹ Eleven years later, in 1770, the same townspeople suddenly found out that Andrei Zagadashnikov was not paying the capitation and demanded back payment for a six-year period, starting from 1764. The man refused on the grounds that he was registered as a peasant of the Makar'ev'sk suburb, where he continued to pay the capitation.⁴⁰ Thus, Andrei had, in fact, two identities and could choose between them as necessary. Why did it take the Bezhet'sk town community so long to notice that he did not pay the capitation? Most likely, this was because his activities were in some way advantageous for the town. The townspeople changed their minds in 1770, when Zagadashnikov's business crumbled: he failed to pay his debts, went bankrupt, and soon thereafter died. To pay for his debts, his son had to give his store away.

Promissory notes shed light on one additional aspect of social history, that is, on the spatial mobility of provincial town dwellers. About 18% of promissory notes in the Bezhet'sk collection were signed outside of this town: in 50 other cities, towns, villages, and suburbs, including Moscow, Saint Petersburg, Uglich, Tver', Kashin, Iaroslavl', etc. Similarly, people from out of town (mostly merchants), who were staying in Bezhet'sk when the promissory notes they owned expired, used to protest them at the Bezhet'sk magistracy.

It comes as no surprise that the Bezhet'sk residents' trade contacts were mostly with central and northwestern Russia. They did not do business with the Central Volga region, the Urals or Siberia, as, on the one hand, Bezhet'sk was rather small and economically weak, and, on the other, it was an old town with a traditional network of trade operations established mostly in the preceding centuries. It is worth mentioning at the same time that, according to promissory notes, people who moved from Bezhet'sk to other towns and registered themselves as merchants in Moscow or Saint Petersburg or became government officials or servicemen there, usually still preserved close ties with their native town. They used to visit Bezhet'sk occasionally and sometimes played the role of trade agents for their former fellow-townsmen. In turn, the Bezhet'sk merchants coming to Moscow or Saint Petersburg lodged with their relatives, fellow townsmen or companions: one may suggest the existence of a kind of Bezhet'sk community in both Russian capitals.

To my mind, these few examples show ways that the social history of eighteenth-century Russia can be studied "from below": this is a task still to be fulfilled. We have large quantities of promissory notes copied into books of protests. The chances are good that promissory notes from other parts of the country could yield a lot of unexpected information. At the same time, there surely exist other sources, never before been studied from this point of view, that may well add to the picture.

39. RGADA, f. 709, op. 2, L. 1ob.

40. Kamenskii, *Povsednevnost' russkikh gorodskikh obivatelei*, 323.

By trying to reconstruct the real social structure of Early Modern Russia and interactions between different social groups, we may get closer to understanding what Russian society was actually like at the time and whether it indeed existed as an integral entity.

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