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## Village Assemblies in Vologda Province at the End of the Nineteenth and Beginning of the Twentieth Centuries

Assemblies of various kinds were the most important institutions for decision-making among the peasants of Vologda province at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The peasants, however, viewed the assemblies, and in particular participation in them, with some degree of ambivalence. This article seeks to examine the relationship between the laws in existence at the time, and the actual practice of how peasant society was run. To highlight this problem it is useful to examine those features of the assemblies which were most fully covered by the law: the various types of peasant assemblies, the limits of their sphere of responsibility, and the conditions for their legitimacy.

The ‘General Provisions for Free Peasants’ (19 February 1861) [PSZ], passed at the time of the Emancipation of the Serfs, and the subsequent decrees of the Governing Senate, established a single model for the running of rural society which applied to both former state-owned and former proprietary peasants regardless of the size of their commune and other local conditions. To this end the system of assemblies, the way in which they were to be held, and the limits of their sphere of responsibilities were carefully prescribed in the law.<sup>1</sup> The ‘General Provisions’ provided for the

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<sup>1</sup> According to Article 51 of the ‘General Provisions’ the competencies of the village assembly are as follows: ‘1) the election of village officials and the appointment of delegates to the *volost* assembly;

existence of two types of assembly: the village assembly and the *volost* assembly.<sup>1</sup> Later Senate resolutions introduced other types of assembly into the legislation too.

Settlement assemblies (assemblies held by the householders of a single settlement) were legally created by First Department of the Senate Decree No. 3877, dated 22 November 1883. They were to meet to discuss only the admittance of a new member into the settlement. The official range of duties given to the settlement assemblies grew steadily until 1901 when they included the following issues: management of *mir* land when the land was owned by separate settlements and not by the entire commune, the allocation of duties, the election of trustees from the settlement for various issues, the repartition of land and the partition of land amongst families [Praktika 1914: 559–561].

Another type of assembly was created by Senate Resolution No. 906, dated 4 March 1897, which stated: ‘Amalgamated village assemblies as distinct bodies of municipal administration are allowed by law when they are to discuss issues concerning the proper performance by the peasants of the duties assigned to them’ [Obshchestvennye dela 1905: 2].

The singularity of the legal status of the assemblies created by the Senate Resolutions was down to the fact that these assemblies were

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2) judgements concerning the removal from the community of dangerous or corrupt members and the temporary expulsion of peasants from the assembly for not more than three years; 3) the removal of members from the community and the admittance of new ones; 4) the appointment of trustees and guardians and oversight of their activities; 5) allowing the partition of land amongst families; 6) matters concerning the communal use of *mir* land, namely: the repartition of plots of land, payment and reimbursement for husbandry services, the final repartition of communal lands into permanent plots and so on; 7) the management of plots of *mir* land which are owned by plot owners or households (in heredity) and which are for whatever reason empty or not in use by a household; 8) the discussion of and intercession in issues of general need, well-being, charity and the teaching of literacy; 9) the hearing, where appropriate, of complaints and requests regarding community matters through particular delegates; 10) ordering collections to cover *mir* expenses; 11) assessing government taxes, territory and *mir* monetary levies as well as territory and *mir* duties not involving money which the peasants are obliged to pay or fulfil and the keeping of accounts for the taxes and levies indicated; 12) oversight of officials elected by the commune and the allocation of a salary or other remuneration to these officials for their services; 13) matters regarding military service to the extent that they concern the commune; 14) assigning quitrent payments and corvée duty according to livestock ownership, number of people or according to some other accepted method where duties performed for a landowner are the collective joint responsibility of the entire community; 15) taking of measures to warn of and collect tax arrears; 16) the offering of loans from the village reserves and of any sort of relief; 17) the granting of permission to go about municipal business and 18) all cases in which according to the law in general or according to provisions concerning the peasants the agreement or permission of the commune is required’. Furthermore, according to Addendum 3 to Article 51, ‘the village assembly may discuss and issue judgements only on the matters stated in this Article’ [PSZ 1863: 148–149].

<sup>1</sup> ‘The village assembly consists of peasant householders who belong to a commune and, in addition, of all village officials appointed by election’ (Article 47 of the ‘General Provisions’). ‘The *volost* assembly consists of village and *volost* officials, elected delegates and those listed in Article 112 and of peasants elected from each settlement or hamlet which belongs to the *volost*, one from each group of ten houses which uses the land to fulfil their duties or which have acquired plots of land as part of their personal property’ (Article 71 of the ‘General Provisions’).

not closely regulated and all that the law had actually laid out was their sphere of responsibilities. The issue of their legitimacy was either decided by the village commune itself or by a higher authority on the basis of what they thought an assembly should be like and who they thought should be represented in it. Some types of assembly, such as partial village ones (assemblies in which representatives from only some of the settlements which constituted the commune took part), were not provided for by the law at all and so the very fact that they took place actually contradicted the legislation.

The 'General Provisions' contained two provisions concerning the required number of householders at the assembly. First, 'village assembly judgements are only recognised as legal when the following are present at the assembly: the village elder, or his deputy, and no fewer than half of the peasants who have the right to participate in the assembly' (Article 52). Second, 'to pass a judgement on the following<sup>1</sup> matters the agreement of no fewer than two-thirds of all peasants who have a vote at the assembly is required' (Article 54) [PSZ 1863: 149].

The way in which the assemblies were actually organised and the manner in which they were held differed considerably from the model described by the law. Village communes created their own system of municipal peasant administration and the two models had little in common. Local authorities could have been informed of deviations from the letter of the law, but in some instances they were forced to turn a blind eye or to even give their support to such deviations (as far as the membership of the assembly, its responsibilities and so on were concerned). A writer from Nikolsk district who signed himself 'P.P.' described an example of this: 'The authorities [civil servants in charge of peasant affairs — *D. M.*] who had realised the full irregularity of the state of affairs [a demand to deal with the partition of family land at the village assembly<sup>2</sup> — *D. M.*] had to interpret the law in such a way that matters concerning the partition of family land as with other land matters could be decided by settlement assemblies whether they liked it or not; the Senate Resolutions which did not fit with this interpretation, on the other hand, had to be ignored' [P. P. 1899: 1].

The main sources for the discussion that follows were documents found in the State Archive of Vologda *Oblast* and in the Central Archive of Veliky Ustyug. These documents mainly consisted of

<sup>1</sup> '1) on the replacement of land in communal use with land in strips or in household use (in heredity); 2) on the repartition of *mir* plots as permanent plots owned in heredity; 3) on the repartition of *mir* land; 4) on the creation of voluntary *mir* stores and the use of *mir* capital; and 5) on the removal of corrupt peasants from the commune and on the handing over of such people to the government'.

<sup>2</sup> It was extremely difficult to convene an assembly on account of the large size of the commune, especially to discuss matters which concerned just one settlement.

around 300 assembly judgements of various types, requests from peasants concerned with the functioning of the municipal administration (212 requests from 5 districts in Vologda province) and explanatory notes written by village officials in response to a request from a higher authority (20 examples). Ethnographic descriptions, and in particular documents gathered by the correspondents of the Tenishev Bureau in Vologda province<sup>1</sup> at the end of the nineteenth century, are the most important source which I have used here.

### Types of Peasant Assemblies

The peasants developed their own particular idea of what constitutes an assembly. A. A. Shustikov, in describing the repartition of *mir* land, noted that the assembly did not involve just a discussion of the future dimensions of strips of land which ended in the signing of a resolution; over the course of the next two days the peasants marched across the fields to actually mark out specific strip boundaries [Shustikov 1889: 2]. Furthermore, the entire three-day procedure is described as a single assembly. In the same way N. K. Kirillov, a correspondent from the Tenishev Bureau in Ryabovskaya *volost* in Solvychevodsk district, described the settlement assembly meeting to discuss the correct boundaries of vegetable plots and wrote: 'First they piled across one of the fields and then across a second one and marked out the boundary one after the other' [Russkie kretyane 2007, III: 554].

The collective process of making (or confirming) an authoritative decision by the householders was the primary purpose of the assembly for the peasants, and not its official functions. With this in mind, the assemblies could last for up to several days and did not have one single specific place where they were held.

It is probable that the assembly system which actually existed in the Vologda village at the end of the nineteenth century was a continuation of the system which existed before the Emancipation. A. V. Kamkin analysed peasant municipal administration in the Northern village during the eighteenth century, and discovered assemblies of five types: inter-*volost*, inter-*mir*, *mir* (*volost* or another administrative unit), incomplete *mir*, and village [Kamkin 1990: 7–12]. The inter-*volost* type had no analogies at the end of the nineteenth century (or so far as has yet been discovered). The other four types of assemblies can be seen as prototypes for the amalgated, *volost*, village, incomplete village, and settlement assemblies from the end of the nineteenth century.

<sup>1</sup> On the Tenishev Bureau, see Dmitry Baranov, 'V. N. Tenishev's "Peasant" Programme: Ideology and Practice' // *Forum for Anthropology and Culture*. 2006. No. 3. Pp. 193–205 <[http://anthropologie.kunstkamera.ru/files/pdf/eng003/eng3\\_baranov.pdf](http://anthropologie.kunstkamera.ru/files/pdf/eng003/eng3_baranov.pdf)> [Eds.].

A significant number of the duties that the village assembly was supposed to carry out according to the 'General Provisions', were in practice given over to the settlement assembly, i.e. the assembly of the householders from a single settlement. Such assemblies took place in any settlement regardless of its size. An investigation into a complaint about a settlement resolution in 1893 led by the elder of Tregubov *volost* (Ustyug district) revealed, for example, that 'there are only two householders in this village who have been given the right to vote at the assembly by the heads of household' [VTsA. F. 200. Op. 1. D. 2138. L. 170]. Therefore only these two householders were supposed to participate in the repartition of land. As a result, a decision was procedurally impossible, since no fewer than two-thirds of the votes were required for a decision to be made, and Pavel Koksharov refused to give his portion of land to his neighbour Aleksandr Koksharov.

The resolutions and decrees of the Senate which determined the assemblies' responsibilities in general did not have any serious influence over the settlement assemblies. Furthermore, there were significant local differences between what the settlement assemblies did. Thus, according to the reports of F. A. Gudkov, a correspondent of the Tenishev Bureau from Novo-Nikolsk *volost* in Gryazovetsk district, 'the following issues are discussed at the settlement assemblies: when should the boundaries of vegetable plots be corrected around areas which have been mown? When should a shepherd be hired, when is it necessary to hire labourers for municipal work projects [...] what are the procedures for the renting of plots of municipal land, the renting of fishing rights and what sort of fire-fighting equipment was required? How should the commune carry out its duties effectively?' [Russkie krestyane 2007, II: 53]. Three settlement assembly judgements from Vakhrameevskoe village in Dvinskaya oblast were struck down by resolution of the Totemsk District Council in 1901. These judgements were concerned with state and local tax arrears [GAVO. F. 247. Op. 1. D. 408. L. 2–4].

In central districts, the duties of the settlement assemblies were much broader and, alongside matters concerning the local economy typical for settlement assemblies in Vologda province districts generally, the settlement assembly also dealt with the partition of family land (Travinskoe village in Baidarovskaya *volost* in Nikolsk district) [VTsA. F. 569. Op. 1. D. 12. L. 75] and household tax assessment (Terebaevskoe village in Baidarovskaya *volost* in Nikolsk district) [VTsA. F. 569. Op. 1. D. 45. L. 83].

The allocation of duties amongst the various types of assembly was carried out directly by the village commune, and depended upon the particularities of the village communes in a particular place. Thus in Ustyug and Nikolsk districts, where the communes were as a rule

reasonably large, both in terms of the space which they occupied and the number of households (something which seriously complicated convening the village assembly), a large portion of the duties were given over to the settlement assembly, which was much easier to convene. In Gryazovets district, on the other hand, small and medium village communes were the norm and it is not such a difficult task to convene the village assembly. The duties of the settlement assembly, therefore, were narrower.

It is possible to identify several other assembly types in addition to the settlement, village and *volost* assemblies. First, there are the *incomplete mir (village) assemblies*. ‘This sort of assembly, as a rule, did not deal with general *mir* issues but with comparatively narrow issues which concerned only a few villages in the ‘mir’ [Kamkin 1990: 10]. Therefore, only householders from settlements concerned with resolving the issue at hand took part in such assemblies. In particular, the following case was recorded in Nesvoiskaya *volost* in Vologda district: ‘Peasants from three villages produced an invoice for Golovin [the former village elder — *D. M.*] because Golovin did not collect taxes in the other villages, tax collectors did. Thus Golovin acknowledged the 63 roubles 5 kopecks assessed to him and pledged to pay them voluntarily’ [GAVO. F. 76. Op. 1. D. 410. L. 6–6 ob.].

*Amalgamated assemblies* could be convened in a similar way so that representatives from interested settlements from various village communes could take part. Thus on 7 June 1896 there was an assembly in Chuchkovskaya *volost* in Totemsk district in which householders from 26 villages from three village communes took part, and discussed issues concerning additional strips of land offered to peasants from different communities for general ownership [GAVO. F. 685. Op. 1. D. 809. L. 2]. It was the amalgamated assemblies in Novlenskaya *volost* in Vologda district which took the decision to open a tavern which could be patronised by people from neighbouring communities [Russkie kretyane 2007, I: 450].

The question of the legitimacy of the amalgamated assemblies was resolved in a number of ways. The zemstvo head of the 7 precinct in Totemsk district wrote in a decree concerning a judgement from the amalgamated assembly in Chuchkovskaya *volost*: ‘In composing the judgement on the right of the peasants from Andreevskaya village to use additional land and woodland, all 57 settlements were supposed to take part and provide the requisite number of householders from each settlement, not from just 26 settlements as was the case’ [GAVO. F. 685. Op. 1. D. 809. L. 7 ob.–8]. Evidently, the zemstvo administration in this case did not recognise the legitimacy of the amalgamated assembly; but it was exactly this type of assembly that peasant communities found easiest to organise.

In accordance with Addendum 1 to Article 51 of the ‘General Provisions’, matters ‘concerned with communal use of strips of land’ did not have to be discussed by the village assembly if the land was not owned by the commune. It is possible that this rule formed the basis of the creation, in Ustyug district, of a new type of assembly, for landless peasants. These assemblies, however, did not deal only with the issues set out in Article 51. According to the judgement of the assembly of landless peasants of the former Prilutsko-Nikolaevskoe commune in Privodinskaya *volost*, they elected the local policemen at the assembly, something usually considered one of the duties of the village assembly as the representative body of the government administration [VTsA. F. 11. Op. 1. D. 466. L. 48]. It is interesting to note that in a report from the Shemogodskoe *volost* administration, a similar assembly was described as a ‘village assembly of landless peasants’ [Ibid. L. 147]. Thus, with reference to certain questions, landless peasants in Ustyug district were locally perceived as having rights equivalent to those of an officially-recognised administrative body such as the village communes.

Another type of assembly was the parish assembly, which used to take place in the local parish church and discuss issues concerned with the church and things under the care of the church. The official status of these assemblies was different from that of assemblies of all other types. According to Senate Decree No. 3357, dated 8 November 1883, ‘the resolutions of parish assemblies are only binding to the parishioners who take part in composing the resolutions’ [Sbornik reshenii 1889: 103]. In contrast to the other types of assemblies, which were institutions of power within the corresponding administrative-territorial unit, the parish assembly was only a means of reaching agreements amongst parishioners, and not an institution of executive authority.

One can thus identify seven types of assembly based on the types of people who took part in them: settlement, incomplete village, village, amalgamate, *volost*, parish, and also the assemblies of landless peasants. Convening one or another assembly depended upon the people who were directly interested in resolving the issues put up for discussion. The peasants themselves determined what sort of assembly was needed to resolve a certain set of problems so as to attract the least amount of people who did not have a direct interest in the resolution of the issues at hand. However, the resolutions of these assemblies were most often perceived to be the same as the resolutions of village assemblies, a strategy that helped to limit the number of questions coming from higher authorities. Furthermore, there was no clear functional boundary between the different types of assemblies and, depending on local particularities and traditions, the responsibilities of the assemblies of various levels could vary significantly.

### The Quorum

According to the model outlined in the law, no fewer than half of the householders were supposed to take part in the village assembly and in certain cases it was necessary to obtain the agreement of two-thirds of the householders to pass a resolution. In practice, however, the model set out by the law was subject to considerable alteration. Above all the stipulation that two-thirds of the votes were required to pass certain resolutions was transformed into a requirement that two-thirds of all householders take part regardless of the matters under discussion for the resolutions of any sort of assembly to be legal. Thus N. K. Kirillov, correspondent of the Tenishev Bureau, wrote the following in his description of a village assembly in Grigorevskoe commune in Solvychevodsk district: 'The scribe counted 110 householders who had the right to vote including those who had been present earlier [...]. However there were 240 such people in the community as a whole. and so to pass a resolution 160 people had to come to the assembly. since a judgement is legal only when two-thirds of the householders turn up' [Russkie krestyane 2007, III: 552]. The matters under discussion at this assembly was the establishment of a night-time patrol in the villages to protect against fires and theft, as well as the return of bread to the bread store — which is to say, the matters at hand were not among those covered by Article 54. According to the 'General Provisions' it was enough to have half the householders present, or 120 people, for this assembly to take place. However, in this case, what the peasants thought differed from what the law stated.

The 'Information constituting a Political Overview of Vologda, Gryazetsk, Kadinkov Districts and Part of Totemsk District for 1895' describes a situation in Kuzminskoe community in Vologda district where 'the elders issue a false tax arrears claim on peasants who are not present at the assembly. and in so doing justify their misappropriation of taxes. So as to reach the two-thirds quorum peasants who were not at the assembly are recorded as being present so that the judgement is valid' [GAVO. F. 108. Op. 1. D. 225. L. 96 ob.]. The elders thought that even at an assembly where the officials' report was to be discussed (something which is also not mentioned in Article 54 of the 'General Provisions') two-thirds of the householders should take part and not half, i.e. there needed to be this number of signatures on the resolution for it to be signed off by the territorial chief. The peasant leadership thus altered their understanding of Article 54 of the 'General Provisions' and its application was increased to all assemblies and to matters other than those set out in the law.

This application of the law, however, was not typical for all village communes in Vologda province. Such a cavalier attitude to the quorum was not acceptable in large communities. In Nikolsk district,

therefore, and in a large part of Ustyug district, for example, another interpretation of the ‘General Provisions’ was adopted. A candidate for village elder at a meeting of the village assembly convened by Nestefеровskaya *volost* administration had this say in response to a complaint about illegal activity:

The householders met at 9 o’clock, but Ivanov, a candidate for elder, arrived at 10 o’clock, and in an extremely drunken condition to boot. From the roll-call it transpired that there were 195 people at the assembly. However, the total figure for all the householders of the Pokrovskoe community who had the right to vote was higher — 470 people. Fewer than half those eligible had come to the assembly, and so the village scribe explained to the candidate for elder that [...] the assembly could not take place. But hearing this, Elder Ivanov set off from the village commune building to get the missing 40 householders to the meeting [VTsA. F. 201. Op. 1. D. 3669. L. 70–70 ob.].

In order for this assembly to be considered as having taken place, the attendance of only a half and not two-thirds of householders was required. It is interesting to note that if one takes into account the widespread practice of falsifying the missing number of householders, then this assembly could have taken place without any problems at all. However, in this case the low attendance was taken advantage of by an official who was clearly not in a state to conduct the scheduled assembly.

The notion that the participation of only a half and not two-thirds of householders was enough to conduct a meeting in large village communes vindicates the resolutions of the village assemblies in Ustyug district, for example in Blagoveshchensk community in Nestefеровskaya *volost* for 1895 (there were 411 householders in this community in 1895) [VTsA. F. 201. Op. 2. D. 452. L. 1–36].

Date of Assembly	Number of Signatures on the Judgement	% of Householders
21 January 1895	249	60
20 March 1895	243	59
22 April 1895	232	56
29 July 1895	209	50
4 October 1895	298	70
30 December 1895	209	50

Thus according to the resolutions two-thirds of householders participated in only one assembly in Blagoveshchensk community in 1895; this assembly discussed the payment of taxes, i.e. an issue not mentioned in Article 54 of the ‘General Provisions’ but one which

was nonetheless of particular importance to the peasants. Signatures from between 50 and 60 per cent of householders are found on all other judgements.

The difference in interpretation of the stipulation in the 'General Provisions' regarding the required level of peasant attendance at an assembly may be explained by the difference in the size of the village communes. If in Vologda district communities were comparatively small (8 to 80 householders), then in Ustyug and in particular in Nikolsk districts communes were much larger (sometimes more than 1000 householders). The very process of convening and conducting the assembly in such large communities was obviously much more difficult, and thus here the norm became that the presence of half the number of householders was enough for the assembly to be legitimate.

Despite the fact that assemblies were often described as 'complete' in the last clause of the judgement, in large communes it was understood that it was not possible to gather together all householders. Indeed, the dimensions of the buildings in which the assemblies took place were too small to accommodate everyone. In winter (which is when the most significant assemblies took place, dealing with the election of officials, tax assessments and so on) village assemblies took place in officials' homes, in communal buildings,<sup>1</sup> or in the homes of the householders in whose interests the assembly was convened. Only if the centre of the commune was the same as the centre of the *volost* could the village assembly be held in the *volost* administration's building.

To maintain at least some of the necessary conditions for holding an assembly, large village communes themselves tried to limit the number of possible participants. Different methods were used to do this. The main task of the local leadership in using any of these methods was to ensure at least a superficial correspondence with the stipulations of the 'General Provisions'.

One of the most effective ways of limiting attendance at an assembly was the introduction of various systems of outsourcing votes to one representative of a certain settlement, and the creation of settlement delegations. One way of doing this was the creation of a rota of householders who were expected to attend the assemblies. N. M. Mataliev, a correspondent of the Tenishev Bureau from Nesteferovskaya *volost* wrote that, 'each householder from a small village was supposed to go to the village assemblies; however, householders from large villages were supposed to go in turn, taking one end of the village at one go' [Russkie kretyane 2008, IV: 513].

<sup>1</sup> Communal buildings are *izby* rented from peasants and sometimes from officials to carry out the administrative business of the community.

In this way the total number of participants in the assembly was kept down, but the presence of settlement delegations ensured that the interests of a given village community were taken into account when passing judgements.

Another way of limiting the number of assembly participants focused not on the number of people present, but on the number of signatures on the judgement. There was a practice of signing the judgements not at the assembly, but at 'private meetings'. In this case 'the elder took the resolution to be signed around the villages, instead having it signed straight away when it was composed at the assembly as was required by the legislation' (Shongsko-Nikolaevskaya *volost* in Nikolsk district) [VTsA. F. 61. Op. 1. D. 424. L. 1]. In these situations, the assembly practically did not take place at all. The elder might also gather signatures after the assembly at 'private meetings' if the number of participants at the assembly was not sufficient. For example, when checking a judgement concerning the election of a district policeman in Okatovskoe community in Spasskaya *volost* in Vologda district it became clear that 'the resolution [...], although composed at the assembly, was signed only by peasants from the village of Lisitsyn, whereas the peasants from the village of Kudrin had signed it [after the meeting] in their own village. For this reason the resolution indicated was to be struck down' [GAVO. F. 245. Op. 2. D. 67. L. 41 ob.]. Yet in such cases, the resolution looked on the surface as if it had been adopted in accordance with the correct procedure, and might consequently be signed off by the local zemstvo administrator, or civil servants in charge of peasant affairs. Violations could be uncovered only if the adopted judgement worked against the interests of a group of peasants who then issued a request for its annulment, as a result of which an investigation into the circumstances in which the resolution was signed would be carried out.

The falsification of signatures on a 'judgement' (resolution) was also widespread. According to a request from the peasants of Sretenskoe commune in Chernovo-Nikolaevskaya *volost* 'the names of peasants Nikolai Stepanov Zherebtsov, Sila Rodionov from Trofimskaya *volost* and Mikhail Gerasimov of Gurinskoe commune were entered into the judgement, as well as the names of some people who live in Sretenskoe commune, without permission, and so were the names of Petr Andreev, who is 15 and so does not have the right to vote at the assembly, Vasilii Trifonov, Emelyan Lavrentev Bacherikov, Afanasii Ansiferov and Savelii Afinogenov Merkurev. These are peasants from our village; the first two are our sons and were not present at the assembly at all' [VTsA. F. 63. Op. 1. D. 94. L. 4].

The system for signing the assembly's judgement in large communes was such that it ensured the requisite number of signatures was collected even when householder attendance was not sufficient.

In large communes, a significant number of peasants, including literate ones, did not take part in the signing. Thus ‘according to the established procedure two or three clerks were chosen out of the literate people by decree of the assembly so that they could write down the names of the householders who were present at the assembly and then sign the judgement or resolution for them’ (Stradnenskaya *volost* in Ustyug district) [VTsA. F. 11. Op. 1. D. 325. L. 150 ob.]. However, the clerks worked out who was present whilst the meeting was going on, i.e. at a time when it was impossible to accurately record everyone who was present, especially in a crowded room. This meant that the list of participants in the assembly was approximate. People were recorded as being present based on what other people had said. Thus as the investigation into an assembly in Nizhnee-Egorodskoe community in Stradenskaya *volost* in Nikolsk district, which took place on 18 January 1895, made clear, the clerk entered the names of 9 householders into the judgement based on what one Osip Tesalovsky had told him, namely that some of them were actually present and that some of them had given him their vote [VTsA. F. 11. Op. 1. D. 325. L. 150 ob.]. In due course, an allegation that Tesalovsky’s votes were false became the basis for a complaint about the assembly’s decision.

Even the clerks themselves did not hold much store by having an accurate list of participants. As Nikolai Kirillov, a correspondent of the Tenishev Bureau from Solvychevodsk district, noted:

After the assembly the attendees begin to leave and only those who are literate stay to sign. Usually they sign on behalf of the whole village: ‘By request of the peasants Ivan, Petr, Andrei and Semyon Tarasov, Mikhail, Nikolai and Aleksandr Koksharov and on behalf of himself, Petr Koksharov has signed’; the ‘signer’ does not get into the question of whether those named were actually at the assembly; perhaps only half of them were. The village administration never calls out those present at the assembly by surname, and does not record those who are not present. The volost administration does not interest itself with such details as long as the judgement is signed [Russkie kretyane 2007, III: 554].

As a result ‘when officials are accused of signing for other people, the elder and the minute-taker to the meeting blame the scribes, and in this way they do not let the question of falsification get any further, and all the peasants’ complaints always remain inconsequential’ (Ryabovskaya *volost* Solvychevod district) [Russkie kretyane 2007, III: 554]. The prevalence of such manipulative strategies explains, in turn, why peasants rarely made reference in their petitions to an insufficient number of participants at the assembly or to an insufficient number of signatures on the judgement. In one case, Nikolai Moklakov, an elected tax collector in Zakharovskoe

community in Bobrovo-Zakharovskaya *volost* in Nikolsk district, did complain that at the assembly at which he had been elected only 200 people were present (whereas there were 503 householders in community). Moklakov himself maintained that ‘a full assembly should have 375 householders’ [VTsA. F. 288. Op. 1. D. 525. L. 2] (i.e. three-quarters of the total of householders). But no investigation of whether there had been an appropriate number of peasants present and whether enough signatures had been collected ever took place in response to this complaint.

The potential to insert missing signatures into a judgement was practically unlimited, given the absence of any oversight over the signing of the judgement on the part of the peasants and the higher authorities, especially given the low level of literacy amongst the population, and the fact that illiterate people always got someone else to ‘sign’ for them in any case.

By taking advantage of this absence of oversight, village officials could write judgements or resolutions without convening the assembly at all, or in the absence of any sort of assembly resolution. In such cases investigations only took place if the judgement seriously infringed upon the economic interests of the peasants. Thus, the findings of an investigation into a complaint about a falsified judgement which allowed spirits to be traded in Edemskoe community in Totemsk district in 1893 showed that of the 133 people whose signatures were on the judgement ‘21 were not at the assembly at all, and 9 people who did attend the assembly left before any judgement about the shop selling spirits was passed; another 63 people [...] indicated that no resolution about the shop selling spirits had been passed on 1 October, and that the matter had been adjourned until the next assembly for further discussion.’ Added to this, ‘the son of the accused [the village elder who had composed the judgement — *D. M.*], Nestor Grigorev Vyacheslavov signed on behalf of 23 peasants from Rykalovskaya and Naumovskaya villages’ [GAVO. F. 685. Op. 1. D. 230. L. 27–28].

All in all, there is a high probability that there are at least some false signatures on almost all village assembly judgements. Based on the way in which the judgements were signed, the way in which the number of participants in the assemblies were limited, and also on the prevalence of cases in which judgements were signed illegally (I discovered 17 of these in the course of my researches<sup>1</sup>), one can safely say that the number of signatures on a judgement is no guarantee of how many people (and, moreover, of how many

<sup>1</sup> These cases concern the writing into the judgement of peasants who were not present or who had left, the signing of judgements by peasants who do not have the right to participate in the assembly and the signing of judgements at others times than at the assembly.

householders of a given commune) took part in the assembly. Since the practice of simply writing down the required number of householders was widespread, one may view the signatures more as an indicator of what the relevant officials thought constituted a quorum rather than the actual number of participants.

If the number of signatures does not reflect the numbers of attendees at an assembly, then there remains the question of how many people actually participated in the assemblies. When trying to work out the maximum possible number of attendees at an assembly one must remember that numbers of those present at a meeting would not remain stable for the entire time that it was held. Some of the participants might leave the assembly without waiting for it to finish, and some might turn up after certain discussions had already been held, yet their signatures and the signatures of others might still be on the resolutions passed by the assembly. The inquest into the resolution about the vodka-selling outlet by the peasants of Edemskoe commune in Vologda district in 1895 (see above) revealed, for example, that ‘9 people [of the 133 whose signatures are on the judgement — *D. M.*] were at the assembly but left before any resolutions about the shop selling spirits had been passed’ [GAVO. F. 685. Op. 1. D. 230. L. 27 ob.]. M. O. Tolmachev wrote that on the basis of statements from the Vologda Provincial Council, instead of the 400 to 500 people recorded on the judgement as being present at the assembly ‘only those who could fit into the small meetings hut were actually present’ [Tolmachev 1903: 22–23]. The dimensions of such huts varied; so, too, did the figures for the maximum possible attendance.

### **The attitude of the peasants towards the assemblies**

The village assembly was an integral and important part of peasant life. By examining the attitude of the peasants towards such assemblies, one can identify two basic stances which influenced the way in which people behaved at the assembly. These were not mutually exclusive; interaction between them was possible or likely.

First, the village assembly was a meeting which wasted a lot of time and required one to abandon one’s agricultural labours. On account of this, A. A. Charushin wrote, ‘participation in the meeting was a duty which was not particularly well respected’ [Charushin 1911: 6–7]. The distance between settlements could be dozens of *verst*s, and the assembly itself could drag on for quite a while, therefore participation in it, travel included, could sometimes take up several days of a peasant’s time. Because the assembly was perceived to be a serious waste of time, a threat from the village administration to convene another assembly when some necessary decision had not yet been made could be most effective. Thus, the Tenishev Bureau correspondent in Solvychevodsk district, Nikolai Kirillov, was dis-

cussing some issues at the village assembly when one of the peasants stated, ‘If we don’t get a judgement together the civil servant will call another assembly and who wants to waste time for nothing?’ [Russkie krestyane 2007, III: 553]. This argument became the deciding one, and after it had been made, the suggested resolution was passed.

If the assembly was not discussing matters which had a direct effect upon the lives of specific families, then the peasants did not need to take part in it, and often tried to avoid it, or at the very least, least regarded participation as a dreary chore. As the village elder in Shevdenitskaya *volost*, Ogluzdin, complained about a local peasant by the name of Ulyanovsky: ‘A. Ulyanovsky did not attend the assembly — not because I had given him permission not to, but because he is in the habit of issuing a timely notification that he will not be attending, and he has not been at a single village assembly for the whole year’ [GAVO. F. 676. Op 1. D. 21. L. 16 ob.—17].

Not surprisingly, given this background, it was only in a limited number of cases that the village assembly played the role of an institution which could take authoritative decisions. In the vast majority of cases, the role of the village assembly was reduced to confirming decisions made in the traditional way (by resolution), rather than making any new ones. As A. V. Kamkin noted, ‘for decades the ways of assessing taxes have been tried and tested, generally-accepted standards for communal living in the *mir* have existed etc. [...] In the vast majority of cases it was clear what had to be done and what decision should be taken’ [Kamkin 1990: 9]. The village assembly thus behaved more as an institution which legitimised decisions than one which took these to begin with. This type of assembly activity could significantly reduce the peasants’ interest.

At the same time, the assembly was perceived by the peasants to be the main institution by which the life of the commune was regulated, and therefore one which possessed an unlimited sphere of responsibility. Viktor Pokrovsky, a Tenishev Bureau correspondent in Ustsysolsk district, quotes one of the peasant’s descriptions of the assembly: ‘Vox populi, vox dei’ [Russkie krestyane 2008, IV: 444]. There was, therefore, in play also a directly contradictory perception of the assembly as an institution which would take all necessary decisions for the peasants.

Despite the stipulations of the ‘General Provisions’, which restricted the assemblies’ responsibilities, in practice any issues could be raised at the assembly that happened to be important to the commune at that particular moment. Thus, the village assembly of Ustyanskaya *volost* in Kadnikovsk district passed a resolution stating that a police inspector who had not allowed the peasants to inspect a body found in a field had behaved illegally [GAVO. F. 18. Op. 1. D. 4525. L. 9]. The assembly in Gribtsovskaya *volost* in Vologda district insisted

on allowing a minor to be elected as a scribe (which contradicted the ‘General Provisions’), but he was ‘a person of good and sober behaviour’ [GAVO. F. 18. Op. 1. D. 4526. L. 32–32 ob.]. In 1891 in the village of Fominskaya in Biryukovskaya *volost* in Vologda district the assembly ruled that the corn arrears should not be paid; those who did not comply with the assembly’s decision were to pay a 3 rouble fine [Krestyanskoe dvizhenie 1959: 115].

S. A. Dilatorsky, a correspondent of the Tenishev Bureau, recorded an interesting incident in Dvinnitskaya *volost* in Kadnikovsk district. There one peasant ‘gathered the village together and asked permission to build a house which did not comply with building and fire regulations. The village did not show much interest in his request and suggested that he make some sort of agreement with his neighbours who were fewer than 6 *sazhens* away from him’. Eventually the house was built [Russkie krestyane 2007, II: 514]. In this case the settlement assembly gave permission for the laws of the Russian Empire to be broken.

The judgements themselves in Vologda province were always presented as being the unanimous decision of all participants in the assembly. The question of the specific number of people who actually supported the decision was not a valid one when it came to signing the judgement since the decision of the assembly was seen as being the decision of the entire community, even of those who were not present at the assembly at all. As an investigation by Vologda Provincial Court into the case of Elder Yakov Ivanchikov (of Rezhskoe commune in Totemsk district) who was accused of faking a judgement, recorded: ‘An assembly was convened which, as was usual, not all the householders attended. Fewer people than was required came, far fewer. Furthermore the peasants, as always, maintained that it was difficult to make it to the assembly and that those who did not make it would be in agreement with those who did’ [GAVO. F. 685. Op. 1. D. 392. L. 5 ob.]. There is no record in those judgements or resolutions which I found of the participants in an assembly disagreeing with the overall judgement. All the same, peasants writing petitions regularly made reference to the fact that not all the participants in an assembly were in agreement with the decision taken.

The attitude towards judgements and resolutions as a meaning of backing up an assembly’s decision was also ambiguous. In peasants’ eyes, getting a judgement or resolution together was not a compulsory part the assembly’s procedure. It was enough that a decision had been reached, and a verbal agreement was enough to express this in its own right. Thus in the village of Gagariikh in Vozhbalskaya *volost* in Totemsk district ‘the partition of land took place without a resolution for this purpose and with the participation of the local

*volost* and village leadership' [GAVO. F. 679. Op. 1. D. 9. L. 1 ob.]. Such acceptance of a purely verbal agreement reached at an assembly fitted with peasant thinking about legal matters in general: as M. M. Gromyko has shown, using data from various parts of the Russian Empire, a verbal agreement was also sufficient in private deals of various types [Gromyko 2000: 97].

Yet written judgements and resolutions could also be formed where there was no legal need for them. In particular, there was a practice of composing judgements and resolutions at informal settlement assemblies. Later this judgement might be lodged with the village policeman. Judgements at such assemblies were not formally required as a record of a decision since the assemblies themselves did not have any sort of legal status. However, the desire of the peasants to record in writing that a decision had been made is indicative of that decision's particular significance. In these situations, the existence of a written judgement does not reflect on the character of the rule itself (for which all that was required was a verbal agreement) but the particular status of this rule in the eyes of those who had made it.

If the construction of a judgement could be important as a means of underlining the status of a decision for peasants, then its immediate content was of less importance. This is evidenced by the fact the peasants did not read the judgement when it was being signed and could only find out what its actual contents were after a considerable amount of time had passed. A complaint from Mikhail Maltsev, for example, a peasant from Minkovskaya *volost* in Totemsk district, noted that, 'When the judgement was written it was not read at all, rather it was signed mechanically so that now many people do not know what they signed' [GAVO. F. 678. Op. 1. D. 157. L. 1].

An array of petitions concerning being removed from one's post tells of a similar situation. Petr Aksenov, for example, a peasant from Nikolsk district, submitted the following petition on 12 January 1897, 'In November 1896 Fedor Terentev of the village of Filin was made a policeman for a year at the village assembly and the assembly ruled that I did not have to stand for election; now, however, I have discovered that I have been elected and that this has been written in the resolution' [VTsA. F. 63. Op. 1. D. 722. L. 19]. Thus even Petr Aksenov, who had actually taken part in the assembly, only found out about his appointment two months after the assembly had taken place when he received a request from a higher authority to begin carrying out his duties.

Village officials, though, saw the resolutions in a different light. The fact that signatures were written down *en masse* and often included the names of people who did not have the right to participate in the assembly on account of their age or where they lived shows that the main addressee of many resolutions was not the commune but those

for whom the list of names of those who had signed the judgement had no meaning, i.e. the higher authorities.

For the village elders and the scribes, judgements were one of the main types of record by which the higher authorities could evaluate their work. Therefore village officials were at pains to submit their judgement or resolution within the timescale set by the zemstvo administrator or the civil servant in charge of peasant affairs. Sometimes they even tried to do this when they had not managed to hold an assembly. Thus a judgement from the Vologda Regional Court concerning the case of the village scribe of Ryazhskoe commune in Kurakinskaya *volost* in Totemsk district states that ‘Ivonichev, the accused, admitted that the aforementioned judgement was put together by him in view of the order of the zemstvo administrators, who ordered that by a certain time all receipts were to be presented to all tax collectors...the assembly did not take place because only 15 to 20 people turned up [out of 450 householders – *D. M.*] and no receipts were presented to Ksenofont Ignashev, the tax collector, at that time’. This resolution, however, not only had 320 signatures attached to it, but also ‘the official stamp of the already deceased, illiterate Elder Vostorov’ [GAVO. F. 685. Op. 1. D. 392. L. 5 ob.–6].

When blatantly false judgements (those, for example, with an incorrect number of signatures) were attested to, or when there were delays despite demands from the leadership (regardless of the peasants’ possible reasons for not attending the meeting), village officials were subject to sanctions (fines and arrest). Therefore making the form and contents of the judgement coincide with the demands of the leadership often became the sole aim of the village officials. Meanwhile, peasants themselves often considered the assembly and the resolution to be mere formalities.

Certain judgements or resolutions which had been put together following a direct order from the administration might not have actually played any particular role in the village commune, but were officially required by the village officials. Thus, the followed resolutions were adopted at assemblies across the whole of Vologda province in 1890:

It was decreed that: 1) no-one at the meeting or in our community is to allow himself from this moment onwards to get drunk on powerful spirits, each member of our community must behave in a sober and temperate manner and if someone, despite this prohibition, allows himself to get drunk at whatever time, he shall be punished according to Articles 62 and 102 of the General Provisions for every instance of drinking vodka; the village elder shall have a list of names for monitoring such people [...]  
3) evening gatherings and parties are banned; merrymaking on

festival days involving both boys and girls is banned [...] for each such indecorous instance the parents or the young people themselves shall be subject to a fine of 1 rouble or to arrest [VTsA. F. 201. Op. 2. D. 412. L. 17–17 ob.].

This resolution served as a report that the village officials had carried out their duties, but it did not actually change anything in the everyday life of the village commune.

In sum, the model of peasant social management set out by the ‘General Provisions’ and other legal texts was not ‘fit for purpose’ where the northern village was concerned. One can describe the effects of the ‘General Provisions’ using the framework developed by James Scott in *Seeing Like a State*, which evokes the necessary schematism of ‘modern statecraft’, whose ‘maps’ of reality ‘did not successfully represent the actual activity of the society they were related to, nor were they meant to’. Yet they had transformative force: ‘they were maps which, when allied with state power, would enable much of the reality they depicted to be remade’ [Scott 1998: 3].

In practice the assembly model created by the ‘General Provisions’ was applied in a much-altered form. The number of types of assemblies held was increased, their sphere of responsibility widened and a number of different views existed as to who was required to attend. These features were determined by local conditions and traditions and differed greatly across the various parts of Vologda province. However, since the assemblies’ judgements or resolutions were submitted to a higher authority to be signed off, they had to conform to the stipulations of the ‘General Provisions’ on at least a superficial level. Almost all judgements contained at least some false signatures and sometimes a very large number of the signatures were false. The list of who had signed meant little to the peasants themselves. The number of signatures serves more as an indicator of what the village officials thought the attendance at the assembly ought to be and does not tell us anything about the actual number of peasants present. The peasants themselves had an ambiguous relationship with the assemblies. The assembly system was simultaneously the main institution of authority with an unlimited sphere of responsibility and a time-wasting institution which mainly served to legitimise traditional decisions.

### Abbreviations

GAVO — The State Archive of Vologda Province (Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Vologodskoi oblasti)

PSZ — Complete Laws of the Russian Empire (Polnoe sobranie zakonov Rossiiskoi imperii)

VTsA — Veliky Ustyug Central Archive (Velikoustyugskii tsentralnyi arkhiv)

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*Translated by Edward Hicks*