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VELIKY NOVGOROD (1136-1478): A RUSSIAN DEMOCRATIC EXPERIMENT IN THE MIDDLE AGES OR NOT?

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For generations the city-state of Novgorod and later Novgorod Republic were perceived as one of the most successful democratic experiments on Russian soil ever. In recent decades, however, this interpretation has been questioned several times. It could therefore be tempting to completely ignore this fact. However, it will hardly be reasonable partly because the idea of the democratic Novgorod has played a major role in Russian history, and partly because the results of modern research have emerged in opposition to the previously common view. The notions of the democratic Novgorod are based on an image of the city as a quite enterprising business city with peasants, artisans and merchants. Also to this must be added a class of rich boyars. All were they free men who took an active part in the political and social life of the city. This article analyses and studies the socio-political structure of Novgorod and later Novgorod Republic; conclusions are drawn why this structure is questioned in modern history science.

Keywords: Veliky Novgorod, boyars, Novgorod Chronicle, Veche, Novgorod Republic, Tsar Ivan III, Sviatoslav Olgovich, Lake Ilmen, Novgorod Rus', Saint Sofia Cathedral, Novgorod Kremlin, Lake Onega.

ВЕЛИКИЙ НОВГОРОД (1136-1478): СРЕДНЕВЕКОВЫЙ РУССКИЙ ДЕМОКРАТИЧЕСКИЙ ЭКСПЕРИМЕНТ ИЛИ НЕТ?

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Долгое время город-государство Новгород, а затем Новгородская республика воспринимались как один из самых успешных демократических экспериментов на русской земле за всю историю. Однако в последние десятилетия такая интерпретация несколько раз подвергалась сомнению. При этом может возникнуть соблазн полностью проигнорировать данный факт. Но это вряд ли будет разумно отчасти потому, что идея демократического

Новгорода сыграла важную роль в истории России, а отчасти и потому, что результаты современных исследований противоречат ранее распространенному мнению. Представления о демократическом Новгороде основаны на образе города как довольно успешного делового города с крестьянами, ремесленниками и торговцами. К этому также следует добавить сословие богатых бояр. Все они были свободными людьми, принимавшими активное участие в политической и общественной жизни города. В данной статье проанализирована и исследована общественно-политическая структура Новгорода, а затем Новгородской республики, сделаны выводы о том, почему прежние представления об этой структуре подвергаются сомнению в современной исторической науке.

Ключевые слова: Великий Новгород, бояре, Новгородская летопись, вече, Новгородская республика, царь Иван III, Святослав Ольгович, озеро Ильмень, Новгородская Русь, Софийский собор, Новгородский Кремль, Онежское озеро.

The architecture of Veliky Novgorod in the Middle Ages

A few hundred kilometres south of St. Petersburg on the shore of Lake Ilmen you find today a small provincial town Veliky Novgorod (230,000 inhabitants). In 2022 the city is not so well known that it belongs to our general knowledge of Russia's geography. But for centuries this Russian provincial city was the country's largest and most important city as well in the Viking Age as afterwards. Nowhere in the eastern and central parts of Russia do you find so many testimonies of the Middle Ages, and nowhere do you feel the time between 1200 and 1500 as in present-day Novgorod [3, p. 15].

Censuses did not exist in the 14th century. Therefore, it is again the architecture that comes into the picture. The size of the area that lay within the Novgorod Kremlin castle complex on the West Bank, as well as the city walls on the East Bank form a picture of how many people have stayed here at any given time. Scientists are shooting up to 100,000 inhabitants in the heyday. Starting at 10,000 in

the first case, it is by far the largest city from London to Moscow, including Scandinavia. Comparing with Florence or Genoa, in this époque, is not entirely wrong. And in the 13th century maybe with Paris Novgorod's trading area was the whole of Siberia, Scandinavia and Central Europe. Just like traders from Central Asia shopped in the city [1, p. 14-16].

The town is also built along the Volkhov River, which runs towards Lake Ladoga through which the Neva River has contact with the Baltic Sea. On the west bank is the large medieval castle – the Novgorod Kremlin (Detinets) and inside the castle complex you will find the city's main cathedral of Saint Sofia, which was built around 1045. The cathedral gave its name to this part of Veliky Novgorod. The castle complex has been modernized in the 1950s and 1960s. From the river side it instils in the visitor awe and has acted preventively for those in power. The West Bank is the area of nobilities and archbishop [2, s. 66].

On the east bank of the Volkhov River we find what in the Middle Ages was called the trading area or centre. Here, however, only insignificant remains of the old city wall have been preserved today. On the other hand, there are still a few of the churches left that did in the 14th century that surrounded the square of Novgorod's old trading post. One can thus still get an impression of how the social structure of the old city in the period (1136-1478) and a hint of how Novgorod's economic and later political centre was built in the late Middle Ages. In addition to the nobility and merchants, the Russian Orthodox Church was a third actor and a not entirely insignificant actor. On the right bank several churches were built from 1100 to 1300 – Saint Nicholas cathedral (1113), Johannes Church (1127) and Parevska Church (1207). The east bank was the area of trade, artisans and priests [12, s. 8].

But the two focuses of power in Veliky Novgorod, one of Eastern Europe's most important cultural and economic centres during many centuries, were very early connected by a bridge. The main bridge, today Vilikiy Most, went from one of the castle gates of the Novgorod Kremlin on the west bank and the large square on the east side. Strategically a dangerous experiment due to the large crowds that can suddenly storm into the castle, but seen from an expansion of city and area a genius.

Although the division of the city indicates a normal community the bridge indicates that there has been a different form of government than the norm in Europe's Middle Ages [2, s. 63-64].

Novgorod and its location between the Golden Horde, Lithuania and Moscow

A key word in the history of Novgorod and Novgorod Rus' has been political agility. A geographical location between Grand Duchy of Lithuania on the one hand and the principality of Moscow on the other, just as Mongol hordes ravaged violently in the 13th century have devised that there should be political agility in the city-state. Around 1250 taxes were paid to Golden Horde. However, as the importance of the Golden Horde diminished, the security situation changed significantly in Eastern Russia. But basically, this political and economic dependence was of a symbolic nature. Novgorod's foreign policy had two goals – partly to defend Novgorod Rus' from enemies to the west, partly to expand and preserve the city's possessions in north-eastern and eastern Russia. Novgorod had to pay close attention to the political game in other Russian principalities such as Pskov, Moscow, Ryazan, Vladimir-Suzdal and Tver [5, p. 106-107].

The administrative division of Novgorod Republic is not definitely known; the country was divided into several districts (in the core lands of the country) and *volosts* (lands in the east and north that were being colonized or just paid tribute). The city of Novgorod and its vicinity, as well as a few other towns, were not part of any of those. Pskov achieved autonomy from Novgorod in the 13th century; its independence was confirmed by the Treaty of Bolotovo in 1348. Several other towns had special status as they were owned jointly by Novgorod and one of the neighbouring states [2, s. 67].

Over the centuries princes from the above-mentioned principalities have made their armies available to Novgorod, which at times was a good support in military terms. But the military efficiency and military strength of these princes of course at the same time posed a risk to the independence and autonomy of Novgorod and Novgorod Rus'. Since the beginning of the 14th century Novgorod had recognized

the prince of Moscow as its overlord. The risk here was low, as the prince of Moscow was not particularly distinguished politically, economically or militarily in the rest of the Russian area. But this changed drastically in the 15th century [2, s. 77-78].

To the west was the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which included present-day Lithuania, Ukraine and Belarus. In Novgorod on the Veches (a People's Assembly) several citizens and slightly fewer nobles expressed that one should attach oneself to the Grand Duchy among other things, because the power of the Grand Duke was reduced and a certain form of peasant-citizen democracy prevailed. Most of the boyar families believed that the affiliation with the feudal Moscow principality was to be desired, also because the force in Moscow grew and grew. The Russian Orthodox Church supported the nobility against peasants-citizens and supported Moscow instead of Lithuania. The most important argument here was that the Grand Duke of Lithuania was Roman Catholic and not Russian Orthodox [12, s. 9].

What was different about Novgorod then was not so much that the city could freely choose its princes – it really couldn't. Rather, what was unique was that no princely dynasty managed to establish itself within the city and take permanent control over the city. Rather, while other Russian cities had established dynasties, the more powerful princes vied for control of Novgorod the Great, a most-desirable city to control given the vast wealth that flowed into the city in the medieval period from trade [10, p. 4-6].

“The Novgorod Chronicle” (1400-1500)

The most important source to understand the society and its structure of the Novgorod Republic is “The Novgorod Chronicle” from the 15th century. According to Russian scholars who studied “The Tale of Bygone Years”, “The Novgorod Chronicle” and several other codes, the earliest Novgorod chronicle monument was created between 1039 and 1042 and was a copy or an abbreviated sample of one of Kiev’s chroniclers – perhaps “The Ancient Vault [13, s. 30].

This Novgorod Chronicle was supplemented unsystematically until 1079. According to the hypothesis of the scholars, “The Kiev Initial Code” is reflected in the oldest part of the junior edition of “The Novgorod First Chronicle” of the 1090s,

which formed the basis of “The Tale of Bygone Years”. Russian scholars believed, too, that the text of “The Initial Code” was included in “The Novgorod First Chronicle” in the 15th century and replaced the text of “The Tale of Bygone Years”. This hypothesis has now been rejected. It is believed that “The Novgorod Chronicle” was already based on the prince’s code from the 1110s on “The Initial Code”, which was continued by records until 1115 [13, s. 34-35].

The series of records from “The Novgorod First Chronicle” in the mid-1110s news is unique in its length and textual uniformity. This allows us to use his example to trace the periodicity of replenishment of chronicle texts, the dynamics of the change of chroniclers as well as the individual characteristics of their language and style. According to the analysis of the linguistic heterogeneity of the chronicle, which is particularly significant in the first part of the Church Meeting list, where this heterogeneity is expressed even in the spelling, the refill of the sovereign chronicle was of an organized nature [7, p. 8-9].

The change of archbishop was regularly the reason for the change of the chronicler. Literarily the text of “The Novgorod’s First Chronicle” is also heterogeneous, from short news from the 11th and early 12th centuries to a detailed account of the events of the mid-13th century, rich in authorial commentary Timothy, who left a mention of himself even in an article from 1230. In the 1260s he served as sovereign minister the treaties of Novgorod with the Grand Duke of Vladimir Jaroslav Yaroslavich were written by his hand [7, p. 97-99].

Like much of the rest of Novgorod’s medieval history, the precise composition of these trade or crafts organizations is uncertain and they ought not to be confused with the much more organized guilds (or later unions) of Western Europe. It is quite possible that the “ends” and “streets” were simply neighbourhood administrative groups rather than guilds or “unions”. Street organizations were known to build churches in their neighbourhoods and to have buried the dead of their neighbourhoods during outbreaks of the plague, but beyond that their activities are uncertain. They were organized around the churches, just north of the marketplace, and each member had to pay an entrance fee of a bolt of Ypres cloth (from Flanders)

to the archbishop. The district leaders arbitrated disputes between the members [6, S. 36-38].

According to the reconstruction of “The Novgorod Chronicle”, about 1093 it was compiled, basing on “The Novgorod First Chronicle” and “The Kyiv Initial Code”. The text of “The Kyiv Chronicle” source, used until 1016 in its entirety, and then in the form of a short selection. In the 1110s (ca. 1115) the latter was supplemented with excerpts from “The Kyiv Chronicle” and brief records of the events of Novgorod in the late 11th and early 12th centuries, and the princely code of Vsevolod was created. Since then, as expected, weather records have been kept regularly. Shortly after its compilation, this compilation was continued by weather records made by princely and from the early 1130s by episcopal chroniclers. Probably in the second half of the 1160s Herman Voyata compiled “The Novgorod Sovereign Code”, which he continued until 1188. “The Vladychnoe Annals” (Chronicles of the Novgorod Archbishopric (Sovereign), at the Novgorod Sophia Cathedral) were performed almost without interruption until the 1430s, the so-called “Novgorod Vladychnaya Chronicle” [13, s. 83-84].

According to a remark in the chronicles Novgorod had the right after 1196 to pick the prince of its own free will, but again, the evidence indicates that even after that, princes were chosen and dismissed only about half the time, and the city often chose the most powerful prince in Rus' as its prince. That usually meant that the prince in Kyiv, Vladimir or Moscow, who retained the title Grand Prince of Vladimir from about the 1320s onward, although there were several interruptions, either took the title himself or appointed his son or other relative to be prince of Novgorod. At times other princes, from Tver, Lithuania and elsewhere also vied for the Novgorodian throne. Thus, Novgorod did not really choose its prince, but considering the political climate, it often very prudently went with the most senior or most powerful prince in the land [7, p. 122-124].

Society of Novgorod Republic

According to “The Novgorod Chronicle” the city-state had developed procedures of governance that held a large measure of democratic participation far in

advance of the rest of Europe, but that share several similarities with the democratic traditions of Scandinavian peasant republics. The people had the power to elect city officials and they even had the power to elect and fire the prince. The Chronicle writer then goes on to describe a “town meeting” where these decisions would have been made, which included people from all social classes ranging from the posadniki (mayors) to the chernye liudi (literally, the black folks) or the lowest free class. The precise constitution of the medieval Novgorod Republic is uncertain, although traditional histories have created the image of a highly institutionalized network of Veches and a government of posadniks (mayors), tysyatskys (thousandman, originally the head of the town militia, but later a judicial and commercial official), other members of aristocratic families and the archbishops of Novgorod. In many years, the later mentioned were born chairman of the Veches [4, p. 128-131].

Also according to the chronicle, the executives of Novgorod were always the princes of Novgorod, invited by Novgorodians from the neighbouring states, even though their power waned in the 13th and early 14th centuries. However, it is unclear if the archbishop of Novgorod was the real head of state or chief executive of the Novgorod Republic, but in any case, he remained an important town official. In addition to overseeing the Church in Novgorod, he headed embassies, oversaw certain court cases of a secular nature and carried out other secular tasks. However, the archbishops appear to have worked with the boyars to reach a consensus and almost never acted alone. The archbishop was not appointed, but elected by Novgorodians and approved by the Metropolitan bishop of Russia. The archbishops were probably the richest single landowners in Novgorod, and they also made money off court fees, fees for the use of weights and measures in the marketplace and through other means [2, s. 68].

Another important executive was the Novgorod posadnik, who chaired the Veche, co-chaired courts together with the prince, oversaw tax collection and managed current affairs of the city. Most of the prince’s major decisions had to be approved by the posadnik. In the mid-14th century, instead of one posadnik, the Veche began electing six. These six posadniks kept their status for their lifetimes and

each year elected among them a chief stepennoy posadnik. Posadniks were almost invariably members of boyars – the city’s highest aristocracy. The precise makeup of the Veche is also uncertain, although it appears to have comprised members of the urban population, as well as of the free rural population. Whether it was a democratic institution or one controlled by the boyars has been hotly debated. The posadniks, tysyatskys and even the bishops and archbishops of Novgorod were often elected or at least approved by the Veche [4, p. 105-106].

Tradespeople and craftsmen also participated in the political affairs of Novgorod the Great. The traditional scholarship argues that they were organized into five “ends” i.e., the boroughs of the city they lived in; each end was then organized by the streets in which they lived. The ends and streets often bore names indicating that certain trades were concentrated in certain parts of the city (there was a Carpenters’ End and a Potters’ End, for example). Streets and ends may have taken part in political decision-making in Novgorod in support of certain boyar factions or to protect their interests. Merchant “elders” are also noted in treaties and other charters, but only about a hundred of these charters exist. A half dozen date from the 12th century, while most are from after 1262. Thus, it is difficult to determine Novgorod’s political structure due to the paucity of sources [4, p. 90-92].

First and foremost, among the prince’s functions, he was a military leader. He also patronized churches in the city and held court, although it was often presided over by his namestnik (vicar) or lieutenant when he was personally absent from the city. The posadnik had always to be present in the court and no court decision could be made without his approval. Also without the posadnik’s approval the prince could neither give out Novgorod lands nor issue laws. Besides, the prince could not own land in Novgorod and could not himself collect taxes from the Novgorod lands. He lived from money given to him by the city [4, p. 101-102].

Novgorod Republic and the “black peasants”

The Novgorod area, Novgorod Rus’ or Novgorod Republic was far more than the city on the shores of Lake Ilmen. Novgorod Rus’ spread from Novgorod to large parts, from Finland in the east to the Ural Mountains in the west. The population of

this vast area was far from all Russians but a true rag rug of various ethnic peoples. Most were of Finnish origin. They were not really citizens of the Novgorod Republic, but they paid all taxes in one form or another to the government and leaders of Novgorod. Even though there were thousands of kilometres to the capital on the banks of the Velkhov River.

There were not many ethnic Russians who felt tempted to a life as fur hunters and fishermen in north-western Russia. A land area of more than 3,000,000 square kilometres was unmanageable for any ruler. At the end of the 15th century it is estimated that there were about 600,000 people living in the Novgorod Republic, many of them in the uninhabitable taiga area, but most of them around the shores of Lake Ilmen. Between 1136 and 1478 a colonization of the areas in Siberia took place, not only from the Novgorod area, but also from the Moscow area in the central parts. The fact that the Russians began to colonize the area meant major changes in the social structure of the Siberian territories. The Russians became like farmers, primarily in the area on the Finnish border, but the fur hunters along with the animals were nomads in the area [8, p. 253-254].

The cultivation took place primarily near Lake Onega, 450 kilometres northwest of Novgorod. A distance that, after all, was affordable for the farmers and the distance to the marketplace further south. From 1250 to 1400 by far most of the peasants were free and independent, they were so-called “black peasants”. They owned their land either alone or as members of village communities. The only authority that stood over them was the state power and its practitioners. The demand for the collection of taxes is one of the sure signs that the peasants were subject to state power. So even though they were free and independent, the northern peasants paid taxes to the state, i.e., to the local prince who administered the territory of the Russian state. The main point, however, here is that it was the land of the peasants and not of the prince. In other words, one could not forcibly expropriate or give away the land of the peasants, Novgorod Republic worked in that way [11, p. 154-155].

The prince also played a very withdrawn role in Novgorod's political life. At the end of the life of the Republic in the 15th century it was, in turn, to a large extent

the landowners (the boyars) who came to master state power and thereby put the democratic structure out of force. Among other things, because they thereby got opportunities to give away the farmers “land just as the landowners got extended rights over the farmers and over time got ownership rights over the farmers” land and harvest [9, S. 100-102].

Admittedly, the peasants had to pay taxes to the landowners, but the bidders were of a relatively modest extent. And despite these somewhat intolerable conditions, the peasants in the large area maintained a reasonable standard of living. In addition to the crops in the field, there was food in the forests and in the lakes. Nature contributed greatly to the daily lives of peasant families. The prince also lived in Novgorod and not in the country. Control of the peasants was also not entirely optimal for the state power.

During the 13th and 15th centuries feudal dependency applied to a significant number of peasants, but serfdom as we know it was still not a widespread phenomenon. In the mid-15th century the right of certain categories of peasants in some votchinas (lad of a bigger estate or mansion) to leave their master was limited to a period of one week before and after Yuri's Day (November 26). “The Sudebnik” of 1497 officially confirmed this time limit as universal for everybody and established the amount of the “break-away” fee called pozhiloye. The legal code of Ivan III of Russia, the abovementioned Sudebnik from 1497, strengthened the dependency of peasants, state-wide, and restricted their mobility. The Russians persistently battled against the successor states of the Golden Horde, chiefly the Khanate of Crimea. Annually the Russian population of the borderland suffered from Tatar invasions and slave raids and tens of thousands of noblemen protected the southern borderland (a heavy burden for the state), which slowed its social and economic development and expanded the taxation of peasantry.

Novgorod Republic: a democratic experiment?

The idea of democratic Novgorod is fundamentally based on a picture of the city and the city-state as an enterprising business city with rich and small merchants, with large and small artisans and many rich boyars. The thesis is that they have all

been, if not politically equal, at least free individuals who took an active part in the city's political life. The main reason this was correct was that a strong unity created increased income for all the city's residents and merchants who came from a larger catchment area. The unity between peasants, merchants and Boyars was so strong that in 1136 the Novgorodians dismissed Prince Vsevolod Mstislavich (1103-1138). From this year the autocratic princely power played a very small role in the life of the city. An indication that the form of government has been different in the Novgorod Republic, the prince and his family could no longer live within the city walls. And more importantly he could not only own land quite specific places in the area. The Novgorod Republic was a reality [8, p. 275-278].

In democratic Novgorod the Veche was the centre of the city's political life. The Veche gathered on the east bank, the trading side of the river, when the so-called "Veche bell" rang and every citizen of Novgorod had the right to do so. At this People's Assembly all the major political and economic problems were discussed and resolved. Of course there was always peace and idyll and a democratic atmosphere. From "The Novgorod Chronicle", for example, it appears in 1388 that there was fourteen days of unrest in the city. "The Novgorod Chronicle" reports that the three parts of the city on Saint Sofia and the side of the castle revolted against mayor Osip Sakharinich, and after convening a rally near Saint Sofia Cathedral by ringing the "Veche bell" they marched like a larger army, fully armed to the mayor's courtyard and destroyed it. After this mayor Osip Sakharinich fled to the east bank and settled in the carpenters' district. Now the trade side on the east bank then revolted against the boyars and began to go to war against them on the west bank, like they were fighting those from the west who were trying to get over the market. After fourteen days of armed struggle the week was called again and a new mayor Vasily Ivanovich was elected.

Unrest was the exception, according to "The Novgorod Chronicle". Democracy functioned if prosperity increased, and one did so in the city for hundreds of years. The Veche negotiated contracts with foreign powers, elected the prince whom the city wished to rely on in a particular political situation, made elections to the several

posts necessary in the city government including the mayor (posadnik). Also subjects for the post of archbishop were designated by the People's Assembly. The democratic way of thinking shaped the community in Novgorod all the way down to street level and at the local level. The city was divided into five "ends" (districts), three on the Saint Sofia side and two on the market square side east of the Volkhov River. Each "end" was divided into streets and at all levels there were assemblies of people who made the political decisions and took care of the local interests of the individual district [2, s. 62-63].

A structure of the democratic experiment

The Veche as a popular Assembly dating back to Old Slavic tradition was the supreme political authority in the Republic during the epoch of Kyivan Rus' affiliation. This governing body had the power to elect mayors (posadniks), military leaders and, from 1156, even archbishops. These mostly came from the boyar class. The archbishop was the head of executive power of government and the wealthiest feudal lord of Novgorod, owning most of the lands and sources of income conferred on him by the Kyiv prince. The archbishop administered the republican treasury, directed foreign relations, and had the right to pass sentences. Ordinary merchants and craftsmen also took part in the political life of the Novgorod Republic. They formed their own associations, which can be seen as the forerunners of political parties [9, S. 76-78].

From the 12th century Union leaders began to exercise their rights to ratify the most important republican documents. Rulers were invited by the Veche from other principalities, with whom a treaty called the "ryad" was signed. This treaty protected the interests of the Novgorod boyars. The duties of the ruler of the Novgorod Republic were limited. He was primarily regarded as a military leader but could not exercise criminal prosecution against anyone. Life in the city was managed by an elected posadnik, who also acted as an intermediary between the townspeople and the Novgorod prince. The prince's residence was moved from the Novgorod Kremlin (Detinets) to a suburb called "Gorodishche". Beginning with Prince Alexander

Nevsky the Novgorod leaders were elected from among the princes of Vladimir-Suzdal [9, S. 80].

The boyars and the end of democracy

The notion of a truly democratic Novgorod has come up in recent decades. This is mainly due to the results of the archaeological excavations carried out in the 1950s and 1960s during the then Soviet Union, where excavations in various places in the centre of Novgorod had quite unambiguous results. After removing more than 60,000 m³ of land the oldest layers of the city's underground were reached. In total several 28 layers of soil were uncovered, giving an overview of the building conditions from the end of the 10th century to the end of the 15th century [1, p. 13-14].

The archaeologists were able to determine exactly how the houses had lain for 15-year periods. And what they had been used for. From these studies it appeared that where smaller streets with small houses were expected, definite farm complexes with associated barns and stables were found. Fences around the farms provided traces. Over the centuries the number of larger and smaller buildings changed to e.g., storage rooms and workshops. In later centuries the excavations showed that the farms belonging to the boyars had gradually grown to the size of a manor house, while the smaller houses did not appear as frequently. In other words, the boyars were not only leaders in agriculture but also in crafts [1, p. 16-17; 14, p. 22].

In the absence of firmer princely control the local elites, the boyars took control of the city and the offices of posadnik and tysyatsky became elective. The Veche played a not insignificant role in public life, although the precise makeup of the Public Assembly and its powers is uncertain and still contested among historians. The posadnik, tysyatsky and even the local bishop (archbishop after 1165) were elected at the Veche, which also invited and dismissed the prince as well [9, S. 77-80].

Conclusion

From the early 12th century to 1478 the prince's power in the Novgorod Republic was more nominal. Imperial and Soviet-era scholars often argued that the

office was ineffectual after 1136, when Prince Vsevolod Mstislavich was dismissed by the Novgorodians, and that Novgorod could invite and dismiss its princes at will. In this way, the prince of Novgorod was no longer “ruler” of Novgorod but became an elective or appointed executive official of the city-state.

The traditional view of the prince being invited in or dismissed at will is an oversimplification of a long and complex history of the office. In fact, from the late 10th century to the fall of Novgorod in 1478 the princes of Novgorod were dismissed and invited only about half the time, and many of these cases occurred between 1095 and 1293, and not consistently so during that period.

Primarily, one must conclude that the perception of democracy and social structures more than 700-800 years ago has been different than today. It is therefore important in the conclusion to make this fundamental difference in societal perception clear before further conclusions are drawn. Secondly, one must conclude that Novgorod has been a melting pot of ethnic peoples, somewhat in the style of Birka and Hedeby in Viking-era Scandinavia. The Scandinavian influence has meant a more moderate form of government in the Russian city-state in the Middle Ages.

The picture that emerges of Novgorod’s political life looks in very vague outlines this way. Basically, there were two parallel political organizations, the one that included the boyar families on the west bank of the Volkhov River. The organization was made up of small local units – in “ends” and streets. The common problems and disagreements were discussed and resolved at the so-called Veche popular assemblies. The collections elected both mayor and archbishop. The second organization included the rest of the free population, which was divided into districts according to social criteria, and here the millennial leader (tysyatsky) was the administrative and political top figure. The mayor and the tysyatsky seem to have been equals, each representing his significant and significant part of the population.

Of course, it is unsustainable in the long run to have two competing leaders in the same state. What united Novgorod’s many political contradictions was the so-called Great Council (Sovet Gospod), an Assembly of about 50 persons. Among others, the leaders of the two parts of Novgorod, officials who previously held key

positions in Novgorod's political system, as well as former leaders from both the west and east bank.

That the Russian Orthodox Church to a greater or lesser degree was a political player is evident from the fact that these meetings of the Grand Council were held in the Archbishop's Palace near Saint Sofia Cathedral. Formally, the bishop was the city's primary head, a compromise between the prince/nobility and the peasant/artisan stands. How much influence the individual groups have had at different times is difficult to determine, as there are no council protocols as sources, but in the late 15th century the boyar families have the political advantage. During the 15th century the city-state became more and more feudal in its construction. So, when Tsar Ivan III conquered Novgorod and Novgorod Rus' it was a state that followed the tsar's view of a social order.

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