

# STATUS AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE VILLAGE ELDER IN PEASANTS' SELF-ADMINISTRATION FROM CLOSE OF THE 19<sup>TH</sup> TO THE EARLY 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

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## Abstract

**Purpose of the study:** The article focuses on the research of the role of village elders in rural self-administration at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The article shows how rural elders executed their duties, who was selected as a rural elder, as well as the attitude of the countrymen towards this authority.

**Methodology:** In the process of the study, the authors relied mainly on documents of the State Archive of the Russian Federation and the State Archive of the Tambov Region. The retrospective research method, first of all, allowed us to study the participation of rural residents in self-government. In addition, describe the role of the elder and the functions assigned to him in the process of managing the settlement.

**Main Findings:** It has been revealed if the country people and elders had conflicts in the performance of their duties. Rural elders were supposed to eliminate arrears of taxes and levies. The article considers the cases when rural elders supported local people in confrontation with superior civil servants. In conclusion, the article estimates the "institution" of rural elders.

**Applications of this study:** The results of the study are primarily useful for the formation of a program for the development of the organization of agriculture in the Tambov region. An understanding of the traditions, historical features of the development of the region should be taken into account by legislative bodies and municipal structures when searching for effective management tools. Understanding the features of rural management is interesting for researchers studying similar practices in different countries of the world. For example, the application of researchers involved in local government issues, when comparing the historical experience of different states and regions.

**Novelty/Originality of this study:** The study shows not only how the functions of the elders in the process of managing rural territories changed, but also the reaction of the population to various actions of the authorities. In particular, the typical causes of discontent among local residents on the actions of the "elders". However, often these reasons were due to the peculiarities of interactions between elders and representatives of state authorities.

**Keywords:** Rural Head, Volost, Uyezd, Local Self-Administration, Rural Gathering, Peasantry, Law, Tradition.

## INTRODUCTION

Country people traditionally comprehended the authorities as having two levels: commonplace power represented by the rural social management and the principate supreme power represented by the *uyezd* and provincial self-administration. Governmental organs were treated by them cautiously. Peasants traditionally stayed away from civil servants because they expected only bad things from them. On the contrary, the peasant population saw local authorities as peasants belonging to the same community who guarded their interests. As a result of historical development, a type of rural social management was formed whose activity was aimed at solving the daily problems of Russian villages. At the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, N. P. Pavlov-Sivalskiy made the following conclusion: "In settlements, real power does not come from civil servants of the tsar's government; it belongs to the volost gathering, rural gathering, village elders and rural heads" (Platonov, 1995).

«General provisions about peasants...» indicated that a village elder was a member of public administration (his position was the most important). He performed executive functions. If it was necessary other positions could be created: tax collectors, forest and field guards and rural record keepers. Village gatherings and elective management apparatus functioned under the supervision of village elders. "Nobody like a village elder could influence all rural affairs if he was on the side of the authority: he has all the relatives here, he knows everything and he sees everything" (Novikov, 1899). In conformity with the law, a village elder followed all the instructions of the volost head, arbitrator, rural chief of police, uyezd financial officer, county police and court investigator.

## MATERIALS AND RESEARCH METHODS

The law legislated that those peasants who were members of the rural community, hosts of the households who had allotment could become rural elders. Those who were members of the rural community (abscripts) but did not have land were elected for the positions of village elders' assistants, inferior police officers. The indispensable requirement for those who applied for a village elder's position was that they had not been brought to trial (Kuchumova, 1992). A rural gathering elected an elder for three years. A former land chief A. Novice wrote «the village elder lives in the same place where he was elected, and he has the same outlook. Therefore protection and support of peasants' interests but not the

interests of the authorities is a routine thing for him: only occasionally there is acquiescence in a village because of the village elder. The biggest part of them considers themselves to be controlled by the community. Most often they say «this is what the community wishes» ([Kuchumova, 1992](#)).

The law did not regulate the property qualification but in real life, these positions were held by peasants of average means. As a rule, competent peasants became village elders. When a village elder was elected the age of the candidate was taken into consideration. According to the law an applicant could not occupy this position provided he was 25 years old and he already separated from his father's family as the head of his own household and a family. In practice, peasants under 30 did not become village elders as, in peasants' opinion, this position required life experience and wit.

A village elder performed various functions: calling and dissolution of the rural gathering, presenting various issues to the community, preserving boundaries of a land plot, ensuring maintenance of means of communication, temporary bridges, swamp coverings, calling for an adherence to the agreements between peasants, watching the timely writing census lists for taxation purposes, writing passports and documents for departure. He was in charge of preserving public property, money and grain as well as property of tax-dodgers; tracked duly execution of different work and taxation ([Russian legislation of X – XX centuries, 1989](#)). Last but not least, the importance of duty quite often became the reason for conflicts between the elder and the countrymen. So, for example, in 1894 a peasant of the village Sosnovka of the 5-th community Pavel Baikulov complained about the village elder Pavel Popov, accusing him of the authority abuse. Baikulov claimed that the elder had arrested him for two days with no reason for that at Sosnovka volost administration. In his opinion, the elder insulted him and did his damage by 15 rubles. He believed that the arrest was a revenge for the lawsuit. However, the arrest statement which was done in the presence of two coroner's jury members showed that he was punished for the unpaid tax of 1893 ([GATO. F. 214. Op. 1. D. 60. L. 1. L. 3.](#)).

The discontent of peasants was also caused by methods that certain elders used collecting tax arrears. N. Brzhesky wrote in this regard: «Village elders have turned into irresponsible servants of the inferior police officers whose main duty consists of gathering taxes and application of enforcement measures to the countrymen – to taxpayers in default» ([Brzheskij 1908](#)). To confirm the latter fact we shall quote a peasant's letter from the front. It is a quote from the letter of the warrant officer of the 5th company of 234 Bogucharskiy regiment from February, 15th, 1915 «When collecting taxes Dyachenkovskiy Village elder Nesterenko breaks into log huts of the reserves, takes away samovars, livestock, shouts at the top of his voice, frightens the old woman-mother, the wife and small children, ruins everything, wheedles out the last money» ([GARF. F. D-4. Op. 124. D. 14. CH. 7. L. 4ob](#)). It is possible to assume, that such service eagerness of certain elders during collecting arrears from their countrymen did not add them authority and respect.

Duties of the police department were assigned to the village elder: they protected the deanery, property from criminal acts, detained tramps, refugees, military deserters; supervised in extreme cases; in case of a crime they conducted a preliminary inquiry, detained guilty, protected the evidence of crimes.

The evidence of this is the case from May, 19th, 1915 which came to the land chief of the 5-th district of Morshansk uyezd.

At 9 o'clock in the evening, on Trinity Sunday Pavel Mineev, a peasant of the village Maliy Burdas of Kerenskiy uyezd was going with his friends along the street in the village Otorma and was playing the accordion. The village elder Phillip Ozhogin stopped him and asked him to not play the accordion because of the approaching holiday. Mineev stopped playing, however, he came to another street and started playing again and gathered a khorovod. It was already at 12 o'clock. The village elder, a police officer and a village policeman came up to them and told them to go away. Everybody went away» ([GATO. F. 261. Op. 1. D. 18. L. 2. L. 4.](#)). Thus the village elder acted not only as a civil servant responsible for public order but as a protector of the countrymen's deanery.

The duties of the elder included the prevention of bread damage and illegal felling of wood. The case which came to the land chief on May, 27th, 1894 of the 3-rd district of Morshanskiy uyezd is typical in this respect. The peasant of the village Aleksandrovka Alexey Kulikov was charged with unauthorized felling of wood in the estate of Mrs. Lyublinskaya-Polovtsova. The manager of the estate Schegolkov declared, that 9 alder trees were cut down, out of which 7 were removed. The cost of the stolen trees was 4 rbl. 30 kopecks. The trunks of the trees were found by the employee of the estate Yamnikov in the village Alexandrovka with the help of the village elder and heads in Alexey Kulikov's estate who had already been sued for theft ([GATO. F. 215. Op. 1. D. 16. L. 2. L. 3. L. 17. L. 18.](#)). The search for the stolen property and the identification of the person guilty of the theft were also the areas of responsibilities of village elders.

The elder possessed administrative rights. Minor offenders were punished with two days' community service or were fined up to 1 ruble or were arrested for no more than two days.

All this was done in the presence of two witnesses. The elder sent a report about his work to the volost board. The head stored the seal of the community. There was also a special seal for illiterate members of the community, as a replacement of the signature.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Officials of rural self-management were not free from service abuses. Village elders got a small salary from 10 up to 30 rbl. a year. Therefore the elders accepted treats including vodka. Some of these people were convicted of misappropriation of public funds. As an example, we shall use the case which was considered in Morshanskiy uyezd gathering in 1906 in connection with the complaint of the peasant of the village Kutli Shemarin signed by 40 other countrymen. From the text, we found out that before distribution of food loans a rumor had been raised at the gathering that only those who paid 12 rbl. for a quarter would receive bread.

The applicants complained, that “widows and orphans did not receive any bread but the rich men did”. Also, they specified that the elder and the record keeper took bribes for the felling of public wood and did not demand the uncollected taxes from the rich men which the community had in the amount of 800 rbl. in 1905 ([GATO. F. 218, Op. 1. D. 178. L. 3.](#)).

In a number of villages of the Tambov province, there were cases of misappropriation of public funds. So the peasant of the village Kosmachyovka of Sosnovskiy volost Arseny Skopintsev complained to the land chief of the 2<sup>nd</sup> district on April, 17th, 1894 Morshanskiy uyezd about the village elder Rozhkov. The applicant claimed that the peasant of the same village Scherbakov owed 22 rbl. 42 kopecks to him. And I had some uncollected taxes. So he asked him to pay this tax in the amount of 22 rbl. 42 kopecks. Scherbakov paid the tax collector Chumor in the sum but the village elder Rozhkov pocketed 5 rubles and ordered the village record holder to write 17 rbl. 42 kopecks as a part of the debt. There were some witnesses ([GATO. F. 214, Op. 1. D. 155. L. 12.](#)). The research of some resources showed that these facts were not sporadic.

Not forgetting about the national saying “to be at a well but not to drink from it», residents of the same village did not usually criticize such offenses very strictly. Squandering of public money in villages by people responsible for it was not considered a serious crime. Such cases were not sued very often. «Hell with this money, – said peasants in these situations. We shall not torment a peasant for a ruble. We shall cover him up. We paid even more – nothing will happen, and he will treat us with wine, others will know. In fact, we are all in God’s hands” ([GARF. F. 586. Op. 1. D. 134. L. 11ob. 12.](#)). The tolerance of peasants to the crime of officials resulted from traditions of «promises and gifts» of the departmental period, gifts to the landowner, the custom of rural footing. The generosity of peasants was determined not only by the Christian message “Judge not, lest ye be judged”, but also by the ordinary idea “There is no fence against ill-fortune”

Defects of the system of public rural management were already detected in the post-reform period. N. M. Druzhinin who studied the conditions of the Russian village in 1860 – 80ss, noted in this respect: “Peasants made more and more sure, that their elected officials did not take care of their needs, they quite often abused the authority – extorted bribes, wasted the community finances, unfairly punished peasants with arrests, fines, whipped them with birch rods and undermined respect from voters” ([Druzhinin, 1978](#)). At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, rural self-management was not free from the same defects. In the settlement Kammenniy Brod in Kozlov uyezd, the countrymen made a complaint about the activity of the rural record keeper and the elder. “In our village, the village elder negligently performs his functions, drinks a lot, supervises insensibly and spends the general means in his own way. He unauthorizedly appoints a tax collector, a village policeman and a policeman...In addition, the village record keeper makes the wrong records and writes the wrong orders and conclusions” ([GATO. F. 264, Op. 1. D. 5. L. 13. L. 15.](#)). In 1914 a peasant of Dmitrievka sloboda of Chelnavskaya volost of Kozlov uyezd complained to the land chief about the village elder. They had an argument because of the estate which they both wanted to buy. And the village elder threatened the peasant with an arrest if he did not refuse from the purchase ([GATO. F. 264, Op. 1. D. 7. L. 11. L. 12.](#)).

In the opinion of the writer-democrat N. M. Astyrev who was a volost record keeper and knew the conditions of the rural administration from within but not by hearsay. The elder’s activity depended on his personal characteristics in many respects. The author claimed that from the three types of elders which he distinguished the prevailing type was the unfortunate plowmen who had to do the public servitude ([Astyrev, 1898](#)). In fact, the position of the elder was not attractive to peasants. The payment was insignificant, and the diligent performance of duties required many efforts and was time-consuming, frequent to the detriment of the elder’s household. The cases when not only village elders but also members of their families asked to dismiss them in connection with “neglect in the household” were frequent ([GATO F. 214, Op. 1. D. 162. L. 8.](#)).

Peasants traditionally treated an elected position like a heavy burden. Even rich countrymen agreed to take this post only after a long persuasion. This attitude did not change at the beginning of the century. According to the data of the Special gathering on agricultural needs: “the search of candidates for these positions is difficult as that they leave the employment... There is also fear that they can be fined and punished even for minor offenses” ([RGIA F. 1233, Op. 1. D. 108. L. 19.](#)).

It is worth agreeing with a portrait of the ideal elder which was created by the researcher B. N. Mironov. It was based on traditional concepts of peasants and the requirements of countrymen to the elective people. “The elder should first of all stick to the democratic traditions at the community gatherings; secondly perform his functions properly without oppressing peasants; and, thirdly, take care of the property of the community and preserve it against misuse and theft of

funds. To perform the duties, not infringing interests of peasants, meant, in fact, keeping a balance between the management requiring timely performance of duties and the employees who wanted to carry out these duties in the minimal form. It was clear that not many could keep this balance ([Mironov, 2000](#)).

Though the village elder had real power in the community he rarely used it. In the view of modern researchers, the village elder was “frightened” of spoiling relationships with his countrymen (Firsov and Kiseleva, 1992). If the elder had to use his authority it was more often not on their initiative but on the orders of the authority.

The mechanism of such actions was revealed in the memoirs of the land chief A. Novikov. He wrote: “If a land chief, and sometimes ahead or a district police officer wants to imprison a man – he orders it to the elder. And he does it” ([Novikov, 1899](#)).

It has to be noted, that the tradition of a mainly negative assessment of village elders’ activity was established by the contemporaries, representatives of educated bureaucracy. Prince V.P. Mescherskiy who was appointed the office of special assignments to the Minister of Internal Affairs P. A. Valuev, and in connection with this traveled across Russia on business trips estimated their activity like this: “For their fraud and immoral behavior they should go to soldiers or onto a settlement” ([Meshcherskiy, 1868](#)).

V.P. Bezobrazov had a bad opinion about the institution of village elders. He considered their position in villages unenviable, naming them “whipping boys for the village community” ([Bezobrazov, 1822](#)). According to the results of the inspection of some Tambov villages at the beginning of 1880, a civil servant wrote in his report: “Almost all village elders and volost heads are illiterate, play a minor role. The peasants are indifferent to elections, they assure, that no matter how good the elected person is he is sure to corrupt; others try to select weak people, being afraid of autocracy and power abuse” ([GARF. F. 730. Op. 1. D. 1541. L. 6](#)).

Researchers of rural administration of the Soviet historiography period skeptically estimated its effectiveness and most of all independence of actions of village elders. N. M. Druzhinin claimed that village elders did not care about the needs of the communities, and were obedient agents of conciliators, representatives of nobility and district police officers ([Druzhinin N. M. 1978](#)). Another outstanding historian of the Soviet time P. A. Zayonchkovskiy in his fundamental work “Emancipation of serfs” doubted the independence of rural administration, and considered the village elders executors of the will of the rural gathering and the lowest administrative-police posts ([Zayonchkovskiy, 1968](#)). These interpretations were connected with the fact that researchers were interested in the issues of social and economic character and the establishment of the meaningful role of class struggle in the country. Social and administrative problems were tackled to a lesser extent which was explained by the dominant research methodology of historical processes.

The late historian P. N. Zyryanov, in our opinion, unduly sharply and unequivocally names village elders “an outgrowth alien to the communal spirit”, on the basis of the analysis of mainly fiscal and police functions performed by them ([Zyryanov 1992](#)). On the contrary, a modern researcher S. N. Tutolmin considers, that the establishment of village elders was ancient and the closest to the peasant mass and continued existence after 1917 ([Tutolmin, 2005](#)). The documents studied by us give ground to claim, that legislative registration of the system of local self-management of the Russian village was a historically justified compromise between authority and peasants. It allowed the state authority to keep levers of influence on households by means of a community, and to village countrymen to use all completeness of a legal mechanism to inform the provincial and central authorities about their needs and to solve everyday problems.

As peasants took part in local management elections and formation of its work they naturally took the responsibility of authority for granted. A desire of a community to elect an economical and respectable person thinking about the welfare and prosperity of the public as the elder is quite logical. The character and specific features were very important for the prospective elder. Those who could deserve respect and powerful influence in a village community held the post for several decades.

The countrymen realized exceptional rights of the elected elder represented by the community and at the same time treated him like an equal who understood their constant needs and everyday problems. Peasants’ life was full of questionable moments and the elder had to resolve conflicts in the community and harmonize the parties. For instance, the countrymen of Izosimovvolost of Kozlov uyezd specified: “First, the complaint goes to the village elder and he tries to harmonize the parties” Therefore the trial of the village elder was unofficial and directed on the analysis of the business. The countrymen in volost Pokrovskoye of the Tambov province said, that the elder pushed them to reconciliation in all fights and conflicts. A trial with the elder looked like an analysis of the case with the objective of reconciliation ([Berezanskiy, 1880](#)). But when it concerned peace in the community the elder applied strict and effective measures to offenders.

Countrymen treated the elected people as equals. Peasants usually said: you are an elder now but later I will take your position” ([GARF. F. 586. Op. 1. D. 114. L. 101.](#)). However, countrymen remembered that the elder performs administrative functions, has a post. The common symbol of power was a badge on the chest which showed that the elder had power. So the following case took place in Morshansk uyezd in 1915. When the village elder and the bailiff were registering the “peasant property” in the village Kershenskiye Borki a village resident told them off using swear words. The registration was legal and the elder was performing his duties which was confirmed by the badge. The

woman's fault was aggravated with this fact ([GATO. F. 321. Op. 1. D. 185. L. 7.](#)). In ordinary life, formal attributes of the power, the badge of the elder or head were the evident confirmation of their authority for peasants.

The difficulty of a position of the village elder could be described using the saying "between the devil and the deep blue sea". Periodically it was the basis for disputes and altercations, for example, in questions of taxation and debt obligations. On the one hand, the elder had to represent and consider the interests of peasants, and, on the other hand, – being the representative of authority on places, to execute orders and instructions of superior chiefs.

Contemporaries noted that in the following state of rural self-government the best "intelligent people of the village" evaded the elected service in order not to take on "stains", these positions were held by "scum of society" ([Prokopovich S. N. 1904](#)).

So, in one of the villages of the Kirsanovsky uyezd of Tambov province in 1909, the village elder Ivan Biryukov was mortally wounded. After questioning the countrymen it became clear the whole population of the village had hated him for faultfinding and cruel treatment of the peasants whom Biryukov ordered to call him the governor, tsar, and god ([GATO. F. 66. Op. 2. D. 901. L. 7. 7ob.](#)).

However, the interests of the peasant community for elders were more often above their functions. The Tambov landowner, the councilor of state reported in the complaint filed in 1901: "The peasants of the village Shibryay of the Borisoglebsk uyezd occupied my wood and meadows with pasturage of the cattle without permission. They drove away from my guard from the wood with threats. They considered everything their property and chopped down the trees. The peasants drove the cattle to the crops and damaged them all... The village elder did not prevent them from that" ([GATO. F. 4. Op. 1. D. 5188. L. 61.](#)). According to the report of the district police officer in the village Bratkakh of the Borisoglebsk uyezd of the Tambov province the connivance of the village elder and the volost head led to unauthorized felling of the wood within 6 years (1905 - 1911) ("[GARF. F.102. D-4. Op. 1911. D. 72.CH. 1. L. 18.](#)"). Such passivity of officials in performing their duties should be treated quite definitely. It was silent support of requirements and solidarity with the actions of local peasants.

The neglect in the performance of the elder's direct functions was explained first of all by the support and assistance of the countrymen in the solution of various questions. They even acted in most cases as leaders of mass riots, rebellions and disorder. Such an attitude in the fight against landowners found bright reflection, first of all, in the revolution of the beginning of the 20th century. Direct protection of elders during the revolution also made a deceptive impression of its legality. As a result of similar debacles, according to the rebels, they were a manifestation of a victory of justice and carrying out the sentence of the community. An excerpt from the publication about an agrarian revolt of 1905-1907 by M. Shakhovskoy demonstrates the importance and the role of the elder in destroying landowners' property: "Peasants and the elder with a badge appeared in the estate where there were a withdrawal and division of grain. At first, the forage and the bread were withdrawn and nobody was allowed to take anything as they said: "It is illegal, it is impossible" ([Shahovskoy,1907](#)). In 1914 the village elder of the village Milachiki Gromovskaya volost ordered to cut down the alder forest and its young growth without the permission of the administration. The same cases had taken place earlier, during the service of another territorial chief ([GATO. F. 217. Op. 1. D. 59. L. 1. L. 3.](#)).

Most often, during agrarian reforms in a fight between community members and landowners, rural officials backed the peasant community even under administrative pressure. Some elders did not only support rebellions against the governmental decrees but were also passionate proponents of these public counteractions. The following fact demonstrates this - in April 1915 in the village of Chigorak of the Borisoglebsk uyezd of the Tambov province division and crushing of the land was hampered. The village elder Zatsepin took an active part in this activity and launched a campaign against those who wanted to separate ([GARF F. 102. D-4. 1915. D. 72. CH. 1. L. 12.](#)).

## CONCLUSION

Local perception of the rural power limited by the rural village area was typical of peasants. At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup> centuries the village gathering remained the main power for peasants and its elected people were the full spokesmen of "the will of the community". In the conditions of "transparency" of rural space personal qualities of representatives of local administration acted as one of the criteria of their assessment. As sources reveal, cases of disobedience took place usually when the material interests of householders were infringed.

Despite the imperfection of methods of local management it had real power. It was common practice to solve different tasks and problems with the direct participation of village elders and volost heads. The elective principle of officials was close and clear to peasants. They considered the local authorities as their own, understanding their right to influence their formation. Village gathering acted as effective control over the action of local administration, a form of demonstration of public activity of peasants, the channel of familiarizing of countrymen with values of civil society. Occupation of elective positions by peasants in the system of rural management as a basis for the development of initiative and creativity, acquiring skills of management, growth of the legal culture of the Russian countrymen.

Peasant self-administration of Tambov province in the given period had some peculiarities. Firstly, community traditions in the region had more steadiness and the social life of the peasants was least affected by the modernization processes. Secondly, the leading role of collective land use even under the conditions of the increase in the sizes of the land plot in

household use was preserved. During the fight for the land majority of village elders expressed the interests of the community in opposition of peasants to the landowner, and in some cases also acted as organizers of a collective protest.

#### AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

P.V. Erin – interpreting the results, writing a major portion of the paper.

N.V. Melekhova – structuring the experimental design.

T.N. Sukhareva – literature review.

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