



PROJECT MUSE®

Obshchestvennye organizatsii Rossii v 1920-e gody (review)

Michael David-Fox

Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History, Volume 3, Number 1, Winter 2002 (New Series), pp. 173-181 (Review)

Published by Slavica Publishers

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/kri.2002.0004>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/18723>

Irina Nikolaevna Il'ina, *Obshchestvennye organizatsii Rossii v 1920-e gody*. Moscow: Institut rossiiskoi istorii RAN, 2000. 215 pp. ISBN 5-8055-0047-7.

Michael David-Fox

The Russian term *obshchestvennost'* carries with it connotations of public sphere, civil society, the educated public, socially and politically engaged groups, and even the intelligentsia. But the key Russian concept is difficult to translate, and richly deserves a full-fledged *Begriffsgeschichte*. The word was first coined in the late 18th century, but it appears to have been reinvented by the radical thinkers of the 1840s and 1850s to connote “both the qualities of social engagement, and the sector of society most likely to manifest such qualities, the radical intelligentsia.” As such it was counterposed to high “society,” or *obshchestvo*.¹ With the flowering of civil institutions and public debate after the Great Reforms, the term conjured up an *engagée* public more than the revolutionary underground. But in part because of its lingering leftist and oppositionist associations, the Bolsheviks embraced the concept of a “Soviet *obshchestvennost'*” after the Revolution even as they moved swiftly to ban many societies and independent organizations. Devotion to social work (*obshchestvennaia rabota*) was obligatory for party members and one of the desired attributes of the new Soviet person. Although it has not yet been a topic studied extensively by historians, an evolving concept and phenomenon of *obshchestvennost'* became part of Soviet life.

In the 1920s, *obshchestvennye organizatsii* (which I will translate as social organizations), a term which figures in the title of this valuable study, was only one of many competing designations for a wide array of non-governmental institutions, including societies, voluntary associations, professional groups, cooperatives, trade unions, *vol'nye kruzhki*, “mass organizations,” and many others (34–36). In fact, “social organizations” only fully emerged as the standard Sovietism after it was used in the 1936 Stalin Constitution. By then, however, it referred not to the relatively wide array of institutions permitted in the 1920s but to a radically reduced number of mass-membership movements that had always been intimately allied with party-state missions (including many “mass organizations” founded in the 1920s, such as the League of the Militant Godless, the “Down with Illiteracy!” society, or the civil defense league OSOAVIAKhIM).

¹ Catriona Kelly and Vadim Volkov, “*Obshchestvennost', Sobornost': Collective Identities*,” in *Constructing Russian Culture in the Age of Revolution, 1881–1940*, ed. Kelly and David Shepherd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 27.

Il'ina's monograph is the first serious empirical study of the entire set of non-governmental institutions that existed, sometimes only briefly, in the 1920s. This she calls the *obshchestvennaia sfera* (civic or public sphere).

The elusiveness of the monograph's *Problemstellung*, however, is suggested by the fact that Il'ina is not examining public or civic involvement per se, but rather the general contours of the history of several thousand extremely varied institutions – many of which were only non-governmental in the sense of being *de jure* yet not *de facto* independent of the party-state. Others were either regime-sponsored or subject to a process of etatization during the course of NEP. It is, however, a crucial and suggestive topic on both empirical and conceptual grounds. In the first instance, while a large handful of individual societies, professional organizations, and movements in this era have been studied in depth by historians,² and a greater number are familiar to historians even if they have not been the object of special research,³ this is the first serious study to grapple with the entire range of social organizations. Simply identifying them – something Il'ina freely acknowledges she was unable to do completely, even if she has by far exceeded the Soviet historians who touched on this topic in the past – was not a minor undertaking. While all such organizations had to be registered by some branch of the state and approved by the secret police, no single register or archival file exists listing all of those that were approved – in keeping with the fact that no single conceptual category for them was fixed at the time. Il'ina presents new data on their overall number and growth in the mid-1920s. Her book is followed by one appendix listing 654 of the most prominent all-union, all-Russian, and local organizations active in the RSFSR during the decade, and a second appendix of 86 organizations banned between 1922 and 1927. This in itself is valuable work, and I will discuss several other revealing aspects of her empirical findings. First, however, it would be useful to confront some of the broader theoretical and historical issues inherent in the topic.

² Full-fledged studies revolving around “mass organizations” include Daniel Peris, *Storming the Heavens: The Soviet League of the Militant Godless* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998) and Charles E. Clark, *Uprooting Otherness: The Literacy Campaign in NEP-Era Russia* (Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 2000). For a work on a party-oriented scholarly society, see George Enteen, *The Soviet Scholar-Bureaucrat: M. N. Pokrovskii and the Society of Marxist Historians* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1978). On the resurrection of a partially independent *advokatura* in 1922, see Eugene Huskey, *Russian Lawyers and the Soviet State: The Origins and Development of the Soviet Bar, 1917–1939* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), esp. 80–142.

³ On pre-revolutionary or non-party organizations that were banned at the time of the 1922 intelligentsia deportations, see Michel Heller, “Premier avertissement: Un coup du fouet. L'histoire de l'expulsion des personnalités culturelles hors de l'Union Soviétique en 1922,” *Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique* 20 (April–June 1979), 131–72.

Three conceptual constructs, by and large, have underpinned discussions connected to *obshchestvennost'* in the Russian context and, more broadly, scholarship on the kinds of societies, philanthropical organizations, and voluntary institutions with which this work is concerned. These three concepts are civil society, the public sphere, and professionalization. Each one boasts its own history and has been shaped by its own literature, but they all conjure up difficulties when applied to the Russian/Soviet case.

The notion of civil society dates back to Hegel, but in modern scholarship it was given broad political currency and infused with new connotations after the revolutions of 1989. Since that time, a whole civil society canon has emerged, largely outside the discipline of history. In these recent incarnations the *sine qua non* of civil society is generally taken to be independence from the state. It thus represents an institutionalized civil realm that imperial Russia developed partially and late, the Soviet Union suppressed, and post-communist societies need to create in order to succeed in the transition to democracy. Arguably, then, late imperial Russia possessed only a nascent civil society. The notion is normative when applied to Russian history in that it implies that this fragile sphere would, if allowed to develop, have fostered distinct political and social changes associated with a strong middle class and parliamentary democracy. It is doubly problematic when applied to Soviet “integral socialism,” because here even more than in imperial Russia state-society dichotomies are difficult to sustain.⁴ The experience of the 1920s would, then, if seen through the prism of civil society, generally appear to be the story of the suppression of its remnants. However, NEP Russia did indubitably boast far more social organizations than the Stalin period, and even Stalinism promoted a reduced number while demanding many kinds of “public” activities from its subjects. If post-1989 notions of civil society are not readily applicable, yet the Soviet order did actively sustain certain specifically Soviet kinds of public involvement, how then can this be explained? It is one sign of this book’s confusion surrounding the overall theoretical import of the topic (as opposed to its sharp discussions of the immediate material) that Il’ina’s introduction touts the importance of NEP-era social organizations as the institutional heart of a Soviet civil society that experienced its “golden age” in the 1920s, and that allegedly holds relevance for the post-Soviet experience today (3–4). This theme is never revisited.

The “public sphere,” by contrast, is often taken as a more neutral term than civil society, because it is less loaded with universalistic ideas about state-society relations outside Western Europe and prescriptions for contemporary policy. Less well known, however, is the specific context in which this second concept

⁴ The phrase is Martin Malia’s, in *The Soviet Tragedy: A History of Socialism in Russia, 1917–1991* (New York: Free Press, 1994).

emerged – mainly Habermas’s *Öffentlichkeit* of the early 1960s and its much later importation into Anglophone scholarship (generally oblivious to the postwar German context in which it was originally written) with the 1989 translation of his work.⁵ Neither of these specific origins of the public sphere concept necessarily clash with culturally specific phenomena such as Russian *obshchestvennost’* or the intelligentsia, both inevitably tied up in the Russian/Soviet cases with the particularly large role of the state. But they are not necessarily tailored to them, either.

The historical and social science literature on professionalization, in turn, is more openly wedded to an Anglo-American context in which professions achieved full autonomy from the state in national professional organizations – something that was never the case even in late imperial Russia, despite its myriad vigorous scholarly and professional institutions. It was not only Russia where the state was strong and deeply shaped professional development, moreover, but Central Europe and other parts of the continent as well, the former from which Russia of course borrowed liberally both in terms of the “well-ordered police state” and the history of science.⁶ But, as it has been pointed out, remarkable degrees of professional achievement were attained in Russia without the formal attributes of autonomy from the state. Can it be that Russia followed its own path to professionalization, or developed its own kind of professionalism? ⁷ Again, how does the Soviet period fit in? Was it a time of coercive de-professionalization or the emergence of a new kind of etatist professionalism?

The relationship of the Russian and Soviet states to *obshchestvennost’* is thus not merely an empirical issue around which disagreement can and does exist. It is a problem that can hardly even be discussed without resort to a conceptual vocabulary developed in either overt or subtle reference to very different national milieus.

As if this were not daunting enough, the historiography on these matters in the Russian case is almost exclusively tied to the period bounded by the Great Reforms on one side and 1917 on the other. By now there has grown up a large and sophisticated literature, much of it Anglophone and dating from the 1990s,

⁵ Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit: Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (Neuwied: H. Luchterhand, 1962); idem, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989).

⁶ Marc Raeff, *The Well-Ordered Police State: Social and Institutional Change Through Law in the Germanies and Russia, 1600–1800* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983); Alexander Vucinich, *Science in Russian Culture*, 2 vols. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1963–70).

⁷ On the above points, see esp. Harley D. Balzer, “Introduction,” in *Russia’s Missing Middle Class: The Professions in Russian History*, ed. Balzer (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1996), 3–38.

on the mushrooming civil sphere before and after 1905.⁸ Indeed, this literature has now developed sufficiently to boast an orthodox and revisionist view. Against the traditional notion that Russian civic organizations were shaped primarily by their opposition to the state, revisionists point out that state service and ubiquitous state involvement, so important in 18th- and early 19th-century Russia, continued to loom exceedingly large in the late imperial period. This view can be applied not only to the professions in the wake of the failed Revolution of 1905,⁹ but arguably to the pre-1905 professional organizations as well. Even when sentiments were overtly hostile to autocracy, professionals could share statist approaches, especially when it came to assumptions about enlightening the *narod*. Interestingly, a similar trend of historiographical reconsideration, *mutatis mutandis*, exists in the early Soviet case: in opposition to an older tendency to view the “bourgeois specialists” and the non-party intelligentsia primarily as victims of communist repression, newer literature has emphasized their active participation, despite all the violence directed against them, in the creation of the Soviet system.¹⁰

In other words, in the historical as in the theoretical literature conceptualizing the role of the state and its relationship to social organizations in the Russian/Soviet case becomes key. Yet almost no one working in this area has ventured across the 1917 divide, despite the fact that many pre-revolutionary voluntary and scientific societies persisted after the Revolution and scores of influential individual figures active before 1917 took part in the “social organizations” of the 1920s. There are difficulties involved in bridging 1917, because the tsarist and Soviet states were in many ways so different. But it seems clear that a better knowledge of the fate of *obshchestvennost'* after 1917 would also aid in the

⁸ For example, Edith W. Clowes et al., eds., *Between Tsar and People: Educated Society and the Quest for Public Identity in Late Imperial Russia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); Adele Lindenmeyr, *Poverty is Not a Vice: Charity, Society, and the State in Imperial Russia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

⁹ See Laura Engelstein, *The Keys to Happiness: Sex and the Search for Modernity in Fin-de-Siècle Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), esp. 254–298.

¹⁰ See the literature cited in Michael David-Fox and György Péteri, “On the Origins and Demise of the Communist Academic Regime,” in *Academia in Upheaval: The Origins, Transfers, and Transformations of the Communist Academic Regime in Russia and East Central Europe*, ed. David-Fox and Péteri (Westport, CT: Bergen and Garvey, 2000), 17–23. Laura Engelstein, in a rare attempt to analyze the legal and medical fields on both sides of 1917, speaks of an “alliance” between an unreconstructed “tutelary state” and “new . . . mechanisms” of discipline. “In the early days of the New Economic Policy,” she writes, “the weight of scientific opinion, heir to the disciplinary authority of the bourgeois professions, reinforced the official project of social control and social engineering.” Engelstein, “Combined Underdevelopment: Discipline and the Law in Imperial and Soviet Russia,” *American Historical Review* 98: 2 (1993), 351.

cause of developing conceptual vocabularies and historical understandings appropriate for the imperial Russian case as well.

The author of this volume categorizes and analyzes 1920s social organizations in many different ways. One way to classify them is by date of founding. Of the 180 she analyzed closely, for example, 60 were founded in the pre-revolutionary period but survived the stricter policies implemented in 1922. Many of these survivors were scientific, cultural, and social aid associations. Of the rest, 36 more arose in 1917–20 (Proletkul't, the Esperanto society, many "enlightenment" organizations), and the others were founded in the 1920s (including the "mass organizations" mentioned above). Another way to sort them is by size. The regime-sponsored mass movements often included one or two million members (crucially for any discussion of Soviet civic involvement, many memberships were nominal and existed only on paper). For example, OSOAVIAKhIM boasted a 2.6 million membership in the mid-1920s, and the "*Drug detei*" society devoted to fighting widespread *besprizornost'* (child homelessness) was one million strong. Of the far smaller professional associations, the All-Russian Association of Engineers, at 9,000, was one of the largest (110–12). Finally, Il'ina also organizes them by function. Her schema includes trade unions, cooperatives, youth organizations, scientific societies of many distinct kinds, cultural-enlightenment societies, "creative" (cultural) movements and organizations, mutual aid societies, military and sports associations, a variety of agencies and ventures conducting international work abroad, and "various societies" that do not fit into any of these rubrics (174). She finds a constant growth in all these categories before 1928, especially in the mid-1920s: she identifies 545 in 1925 and 4,577 in 1928, a growth of eightfold (101). Tellingly, much of this growth was in the area closest to the regime's aspirations, that of mass organizations, which grew a whopping 76 times in the same three years (101).

This fact alone prompts us to ask whether a new kind of Soviet *obshchestvennost'* was coming into being. Il'ina's book is especially strong on party-state policy toward social organizations. In one chapter she reviews pertinent legislation and policy, which included the requirement to submit an obligatory charter (*ustav*) and, after 1922, made secret police sanction a necessity (63). Religious and commercial organizations existed along with the others in the 1920s, but were for all intents and purposes illegal after 1929. Il'ina demonstrates that independent organizations oriented around the interests of a single social group, such as workers or peasants, were either politicized or considered as such and became anathema in the proletarian dictatorship. Having dropped her talk about civil society, Il'ina now shows in fascinating detail that a large number of social organizations – and not merely the mass movements – were deeply intertwined with the state. As early as February 1918, for example, the Central Council of Experts

of VSNKh included representatives from scientific and professional societies, and such regularized participation by representatives of social organizations in state institutions was widespread in the 1920s. In the period 1922–33 Il'ina identifies 80 state acts that made mention of representatives of over 100 social organizations in 70 state organs and committees (141). Many social organizations, moreover, were supported by direct state budget allocations or regular subsidies.

In keeping with this theme of “Sovietization,” Il'ina's analysis of organizations' social and political composition suggests that most organizations drew their leadership from the ranks of party members. Il'ina even speaks of an *obshchestvennaia nomenklatura* (142). Including a layer of Communists and Komsomols was a necessity for many organizations, and members of the top Bolshevik leadership headed the major mass organizations. In terms of generational structure, membership data suggests there was a large preponderance of young people in social organizations, especially those concerned with military, athletic, and technical affairs. Although Il'ina takes data on social composition altogether too literally, it is clear that a working-class membership was predominant only in the trade unions – a special case among social organizations – and that most of the others were dominated by intelligentsia, party, and *sluzhashchie* types.

A brief but important section of the book treats secret police surveillance of social organizations, maintaining that this was a major component of the broader surveillance project of gauging social “moods.” The OGPU used a “social-class” approach to social organizations that proved fateful to many “intelligentsia” groups after 1928 (47, 59–69).¹¹ While many proposed organizations were banned by the secret police (the author found 120 denials of registration for poor social composition or “parallelism” between 1922–28 [147]), Il'ina also notes many other levers of attempted party and state involvement and control. She makes the important point, almost in passing, that a “conception of a new *obshchestvennost'*” was articulated and implemented in the 1920s. This conception, as she describes it, vigorously supported the formation of “healthy” organizations supporting a wide range of political and civilizing missions, all of them part of the NEP-era cultural revolution that incorporated a war on “backwardness.” Party leadership, subordination to the regime, size, and class/party composition became organizations' most important attributes in the new conception of *obshchestvennost'* articulated by the Party (110–11, 120).

¹¹ This meshes with Vladlen Izmozik's materials on the secret police's close monitoring of and hostile reporting on intelligentsia groups in *Glaza i ushi rezhima: Gosudarstvennyi politicheskii kontrol' za naseleniem Sovetskoi Rossii v 1918–1928 godakh* (St. Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo Sankt-Peterburgskogo Universiteta Ekonomiki i Finansov, 1995), 123, 133, and *passim*. Those organizations already closest to the Party or run by a strong party leadership were subject to the least OGPU observation.

Readers of this book will learn much about the “purge” of social organizations during Stalin’s Great Break of the late 1920s (82–95). While the mid-1920s was a time of rapid expansion of social organizations, this went along (starting in 1925) with increased regulation on the part of the Central Committee. In fact, proposals to cut back the number of sanctioned organizations can be traced back to the CC agencies Agitprop and Orgraspred in 1925 (82). But it was in 1928, at the outset of the Great Break, that accusations of poor social composition and inclusion of social and political “aliens” deprived of voting rights (*lishentsy*) hit many organizations. Scientific and professional organizations specifically (above all in the realm of *kraevedenie*, the numerous local lore societies that made up a large segment of local non-governmental organizations) were hit hard by the effects of the Shakhtii trial in 1928 and Promparty trial in 1930. But the real watershed, Il’ina suggests, was a July 1929 inter-agency meeting at the NKVD that issued rules for re-registration of social organizations. This became the signal for a large-scale reduction in their numbers. By 1932 most had been liquidated, and for the period 1934–38 Il’ina counts less than 20 all-Russian or all-union organizations. Those that survived were primarily the mass movements, and many of those (such as the Soviet section of the International Organization to Aid Revolutionaries, MOPR, the League of the Militant Godless, and OSOAVIAKhIM) were shut down in 1947–48.

This dramatic dénouement allows the author to draw rather bald conclusions about how autonomous social “self-organization” (147) was possible in the 1920s but was totally cut off under Stalinism. Even if there is a large degree of truth in this the fact remains that certain types of public activism were promoted and even demanded by the regime across all the turning points of Soviet history. The suggestion of total uniformity in the 1930s and after, moreover, only points up some of the limitations of the study. No single organization, after all, is studied in any depth (only brief summaries of the activities of selected major institutions are given in the fifth and final chapter), and no individual or “unofficial” views of experiences inside any organization are tracked. The study’s almost exclusive concern with quantitative and institutional history narrowly defined affects Il’ina’s view of Stalinism. For example, Douglas Weiner’s in-depth examination of a small conservation movement argues that it represented a “little corner of freedom” in the Stalin years.¹² Il’ina, however, does not grapple with that kind of thesis and cites only an insignificant fraction of the relevant Western historiography (152, n. 3, 4).

How, then, might all this fascinating material be interpreted? As far as NEP is concerned, Il’ina has taken all social organizations together and examined their

¹² Douglas R. Weiner, *A Little Corner of Freedom: Russian Nature Protection from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

commonalities, but it might just as plausibly be argued that they encompassed a divergent array of developments. Despite processes of Sovietization affecting a panorama of very different organizations, the 1920s experience incorporated the evolution of a previously-existing Russian *obshchestvennost'* as well as the birth of the new – or, more likely, their complicated coexistence. Soviet conceptions of *obshchestvennost'* and the actual phenomenon of public activism, as well as the nature of its organizational vehicles, clearly varied in the Stalin and post-Stalin eras that followed. But it is also plausible to argue that a new kind of public involvement became an integral part of the Soviet order. For many, participation in it may have become an empty ritual, like voting in a single-candidate election, but even so the new Soviet *obshchestvennost'* could have preserved certain forms and values developed earlier. For others – and this could well be the topic of future research – Soviet public engagement may have meant something more significant. A type of civil participation may have to be considered a feature of totalitarian dictatorship as well as a backbone of middle-class democracy.

Dept. of History
2115 Francis Scott Key Hall
University of Maryland
College Park, MD 20742-7315 USA
mdavidf@wam.umd.edu