Conscription, Communal Life, and Conflict: The Soldatka as a reluctant social disruptor in Alison K. Smith's "Authority in a Serf Village"

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Between 1705 and 1825, two million Russian peasants were recruited to spend their remaining lifetime in the Imperial army. Once a soldier left the village he was unlikely to be heard from again, but a soldier's wife, a soldatka, was also thrust into an unenviable role: a single woman with no prospects of remarriage could scarcely be lower in the village social order. This study follows the aftermath of an 1819 recruitment levy in the village of Chmutovo, Kostroma Province using archival correspondence translated and presented in Alison K. Smith's "Authority in a Serf Village: Peasants, Managers, and the Role of Writing in Early Nineteenth Century Russia." This microhistory illustrates the larger themes of gender, authority, patronage, and communal responsibility which might emerge in any discussion of Imperial Russian social history. However, it is the unique voice of the soldatka - who Beatrice Farnsworth called "The quintessential outsider in a community based on married couples," - and the shifting attitudes of others towards her that reveal unexpected dynamics in village life.

During Russia's Imperial Era the state remained largely uninvolved in the lives of privately-owned serfs. Tracy Dennison keenly observed that "the largest landholding families in imperial Russia more closely resembled sovereign princes of the Holy Roman Empire than English gentry."[1] As a result, the provinces of Imperial Russia were in part a mosaic of privately-owned peasant enclaves. Peasants within these enclaves were expected to complete labor obligations or pay *obrok* that drove profits for their landlord; in their scarce free time peasants also had to maintain a community among themselves in order to survive.

Demands from the state for tax revenue and military recruits represented still more from-above factors with which peasants had to contend. Collection of these diverse dues was farmed out by the state and landowners to a commune of village elders, known generically as the *mir,* who were somewhat too old to work at maximum capacity and

[1] Tracy Dennison, "Contract enforcement in Russian serf society, 1750-1860," *The Economic History Review* 66, no.3 (August 2013): 717.

enjoyed the elevated status that came with their age and gender.[2] The *mir* determined what burdens fell to which households, and so the distribution of obligations was usually coloured by a village elder's personal biases. Depending on the social standing of a household, their burden could be eased or worsened when obligations were distributed among the village. Recruitment levies were the heaviest of burdens, and hotly contested because of their finality and the often devastating impact on a household. Once a soldier left the village he was unlikely to be heard from again, but a soldier's wife, a *soldatka*, was also thrust into an unenviable role.

The translations made available through Alison K. Smith's 2009 article published in the *Journal of Social History*, "Authority in a Serf Village: Peasants, Managers, and the Role of Writing in Early Nineteenth Century Russia," illuminate the aftermath of a recruitment levy in the small village of Chmutovo, Kostroma Province.[3] Smith's essay follows the events in more or less chronological order, they are outlined briefly as follows. In the Spring of 1819 Chmutovo elders are forced to pick a second military recruit after the man they preferred to send went missing. The wives of the first and second recruit sent petitions to a Moscow office in charge of the extensive Iusupov family holdings (herein referred to as "the estate office") to complain about treatment they had received from a particular village elder, Dmitri Dmitriev, who was in turn chastised by the estate manager. The frantic tone of the *soldatka*, Pelageia Iakovleva, was originally matched by the village elder, calling his abilities into question and generating sympathy for both of the mistreated women. In the end, a new village elder adjusts the tone of his correspondence and higher authorities are satisfied that all is in good order. Pelageia's petitions continue, but the estate office eventually threatens to send her children away if she "cannot live in society peacefully."[4]

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[2] Steven L. Hoch, *Serfdom and Social Control in Russia: Petrovskoe, A Village in Tambov* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986): 128.

[3] Alison K. Smith, "Authority in a Serf Village: Peasants, Managers, and the Role of Writing in Early Nineteenth Century Russia" *Journal of Social History* 43, no.1 (Fall 2009): 157-173. Smith accessed the letters through the Russian State Archive of Ancient Acts.

[4] Smith, "Authority in a Serf Village: Peasants, Managers, and the Role of Writing in Early Nineteenth Century Russia," 169.

Beatrice Farnsworth called the *soldatka,* "The quintessential outsider in a community based on married couples," and Smith's translations give further support to this view.[5] First, military obligations are distributed by the commune and, therefore, are subject to the same practices of punishment and patronage as other communal obligations. Second, *soldatki,* like other single women, became easy targets for abuses including theft and corporal punishment. Finally, the *soldatka*'s acts of correspondence and self-advocacy could finalize the process of becoming an outsider. The partial translations available, or even the full letters themselves, cannot provide a complete picture of what happened in Chmutovo. Nor can the story of one small village in Kostroma province be representative of what *soldatki* experienced as a whole. Regardless, the conflict in Chmutovo was not isolated by any means, (ninety levies had recruited 2 million peasants across the empire between 1705 and 1825) so it will be a useful example to illustrate typical themes of what could have happened in other enclaves across the Russian Empire.[6]

Smith's study focuses on the composition of the letters themselves and the preferential treatment that the Moscow estate office meted out to villagers with a more agreeable (to the estate office) writing style. When Dmitriev neglects the proper formalities in his correspondence with the estate office, for example, he is told in reply that his petitions "are so stupid, that it is barely possible for something to be stupider than them."[7] The same response orders that Dmitriev do his best to make the *soldatka* comfortable in her time of grief. Pelageia's concerns have "merit" because "the petitions received from her are always written solidly."[8] Through "Authority in a Serf Village" Smith demonstrates the role of writing as a "weapon of the weak" in this serf village managed from long-distance. However, this essay will place the letters and the conflict in a socio-historical context. The letters will provide detail about how recruitment was used both as patronage and

[5] Bernice Farsnworth, "The Soldatka: Folklore and Court Record," *Slavic Review* 49, no.1 (Spring 1990): 58.
[6] Alison K. Smith, *For the Common Good and Their Own Well-Being* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014): 18.
[7] Smith, "Authority in a Serf Village: Peasants, Managers, and the Role of Writing in Early Nineteenth Century Russia," 157.
[8] Ibid., 157.

punishment, and how higher authorities (i.e. Iusupov and his estate manager) interacted with intermediate authorities (i.e. village elders) in times of crisis.

The military draft is especially significant because, as John Keep puts it, "[recruitment], together with the collection of the poll tax, which was related to it, served as the principal point of contact, so to speak, between the autocracy and its subjects."[9] Although conducted through intermediate authorities (like the *mir*), the state might have its biggest impact in a peasant woman's life when her village is called to supply troops.

As Peter the Great rationalized his government and introduced concepts from German and Swedish bureaucratic examples, the Russian state was better equipped than ever to sort its population into categories with distinct obligations and privileges.[10] It was under Peter's reign that conscription began to resemble what it was in 1819, when the recruit levy in question reached Chmutovo. Instead of drafting specific individuals, levies called for a certain number of recruits per certain number of souls.[11] Exactly who would leave the village, probably forever, was left for the commune to decide. Unsurprisingly, individuals and families routinely tried to influence the outcomes of these recruitment decisions, if they had the means. In 1817, Chmutovo had only 19 men and 25 women, seven households in total.[12] Alongside the serfs were 25 cows, 22 sheep, 6 pigs, and 13 horses.[13] Each household's proceeds of farming and/or factory work went towards paying *obrok*, a cash rent of sorts, to the Iusupov landowners – the margins were probably thin at the best of times.

Elders and landowners took recruitment levies as an opportunity to rid themselves of troublemakers, or otherwise use the threat of

[9] John L. H. Keep, *Soldiers of the Tsar: Army and Society in Russia, 1462-1874* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985): 144.
[10] Jerome Blum, *Lord and Peasant in Russia From the Ninth to the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 415.
[11] Blum, *Lord and Peasant in Russia From the Ninth to the Nineteenth Century*, 467.
[12] Smith, "Authority in a Serf Village: Peasants, Managers, and the Role of Writing in Early Nineteenth Century Russia," 160.
[13] Ibid., 160.

conscription to keep young men in line.[14] The first recruit from Chmutovo, Mikhail Ivanov, was alleged by elder Dmitri Dmitriev to have stolen livestock from other peasants and, among other things, to be "always drunk and disorderly."[15] In Petrovskoe, a larger village to the South in Tambov province, one or more reasons for induction are included alongside the names on recruit lists. Among the thirty-nine names included on the 1831 recruit list, fifteen were accused of stealing estate property, fourteen of stealing peasant property, six were apparently "lazy and remiss in household responsibilities," four had "committed various pranks," two had failed to fulfill corvée obligations, and six had been selected by lot.[16] Ideally, as Hoch notes, a recruit is kept unaware of their fate for as long as possible to prevent them from fleeing or from maiming themselves.[17] Mikhail Ivanov did at some point become aware of what was about to happen, and in response he taunted the village elder, Dmitri Dmitriev, then inflicted some unspecified "damage" to one of his legs before fleeing. Ivanov was never sent into service with the army, but while he was missing from the village his young wife, Dar'ia Vakhrameeva, and his mother became easy scapegoats for Dmitriev. Demands for Chmutovo to send a recruit continued, but Dmitri Dmitriev felt strongly that there was no one so "negligent in social life" as Ivanov who could be sent in place of the deserter, that Chmutovo "will be extremely ruined" if they are forced to break up yet another family.[18] From this it is clear that while the draft was at times a useful disciplinary measure, it could also devastate smaller villages where every set of working hands was needed desperately.

Conscription was more of a threat to poorer peasants than anyone else, and one practice put this discrepancy in concrete terms; exemptions from service or surrogate recruits could be purchased, but

[14] Boris Mironov, *A Social History of Imperial Russia, 1700-1917* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000): 327.
[15] Smith, "Authority in a Serf Village: Peasants, Managers, and the Role of Writing in Early Nineteenth Century Russia," 161.
[16] Hoch, *Serfdom and Social Control in Russia: Petrovskoe, A Village in Tambov*, 154. (Table 31).
[17]Ibid., 151-152.
[18] Smith, "Authority in a Serf Village: Peasants, Managers, and the Role of Writing in Early Nineteenth Century Russia," 161.

only for an extraordinary price.[19] Mikhail Ivanov wrote in a petition to the estate office that he had failed to procure a loan from his fellow villagers to purchase an exemption, "O blood suckers!" he lamented, but it is unclear if the blood sucking neighbors cannot or simply will not lend Ivanov the money.[20] Judging by the prevalence of laws restricting it, the practice of purchasing surrogates specifically to fill recruitment quotas was rampant; one 1804 law was intended to stop serfs who had been sold individually (not tied to a plot of land at the time of sale) from serving in the army immediately afterwards, but the practice continued.[21]

Communes similarly targeted economically vulnerable households at risk of dereliction, or unproductive households already in debt. Chmutovo and other enclaves in the Iusupov family holdings all received a letter in 1813 threatening village elders with relocation, should their village fall into debt "…then take the responsible village elders and their children to Moscow and give the fit ones as recruits, the unfit ones [give] to the factory."[22] Like many of their fellow nobles, the Iusupov family was itself deeply in debt. By 1818, the Prince I. B. Iusupov owed 693,630 rubles to state lending agencies.[23] Regardless, this threat makes it clear that an intermediate authority could lose his position if he failed to collect quitrent; a fact that was probably well known to the elders in Chmutovo. The commune had the responsibility to care for needy villagers but for many reasons, including threats from above, elders might prioritize paying dues and treat the *soldatka* as an easy target for exploitation and arbitrary displays of power.

Petitioning the estate office, Dar'ia claimed she and Ivanov's ninety-year-old mother had been "brutally flogged" by Dmitriev, and that he "stole and sold all the grain acquired for food" out of her storeroom.[24] Ivanov was eventually found after several months, but his

[19] Hoch, *Serfdom and Social Control in Russia: Petrovskoe, A Village in Tambov*, 156.
[20] Smith, "Authority in a Serf Village: Peasants, Managers, and the Role of Writing in Early Nineteenth Century Russia," 162.
[21]Blum, *Lord and Peasant in Russia From the Ninth to the Nineteenth Century*, 427.
[22]Smith, "Authority in a Serf Village: Peasants, Managers, and the Role of Writing in Early Nineteenth Century Russia," 161.
[23]Blum, *Lord and Peasant in Russia From the Ninth to the Nineteenth Century*, 379.
[24] Smith, "Authority in a Serf Village: Peasants, Managers, and the Role of Writing in Early Nineteenth Century Russia," 162.

leg wound had become infected and he was no longer fit to serve. When a replacement recruit was finally chosen, Mikhail Ul'ianov, his wife, Pelageia Iakovleva, immediately struggled to meet her usual obligations; now she was alone to care for four children under the age of seven and two elderly female relatives. Soon Pelageia replaced Dar'ia as Dmitriev's target, and in a letter to the estate office dated August 24, 1819 Pelageia stated "Dmitri Dmitriev comes and says give me money- where am I to get money… he says if you don't give me [money], then we will sell all your cattle and grain."[25] Although Dmitriev was likely striving to keep the village out of debt, and keep himself from the Iusopov factory in Moscow, his mistreatment of Dar'ia and Pelageia had caused petitions to inundate the estate office. Hoch observes that it is in an elders best interest "that local bureaucrats should be kept both distant and content."[26] Since Pelageia threatened late August 1819 that she would visit the estate office herself if she did not receive a swift reply, Dmitriev had succeeded in keeping the bureaucrats neither content nor distant.

The proverb, "It is bad with a husband, twice as bad without him," highlights the plight of the *soldatka* as well as the widow. [27] In fact, a soldier's wife was known to be even worse off than a widow; the *soldatka*'s husband is gone but not dead, so she is alone but she cannot remarry. In her study of *soslovie,* Smith defines the source of conflict: "unattached women, childless or not, aged or young, were often seen as social (and moral) disruptors."[28] Chmutovo is no exception, and while it is not possible in this essay to review all of the thousands of documents sent between the Iusupov's villages and their estate office, there is good reason to assume that Dar'ia and Pelageia experienced a notable uptick in slander, gossip, threats, and accusations after their husbands' departures.[29] Tellingly, Dar'ia is not mentioned in this drama once her husband returns from the infirmary where his leg festered. So at the very

[25] Ibid., 165.
[26] Hoch, *Serfdom and Social Control in Russia: Petrovskoe, A Village in Tambov*, 151.
[27] Elaine Elnett. *Historic Origin and Social Development of Family Life in Russia* (New York: AMS Press, 1926), 119.
[28] Smith, *For the Common Good and Their Own Well-Being*, 33.
[29] Smith, "Authority in a Serf Village: Peasants, Managers, and the Role of Writing in Early Nineteenth Century Russia," 160.

same time that Mikhail Ul'ianov took Mikhail Ivanov's place as a recruit, Pelageia traded places with Dar'ia as a town pariah.

In the long run, Pelageia's decision to maintain contact with the estate office lowered her status in the village still further. To Smith, Pelageia's petitions seemed to produce diminishing returns as the estate office and other villagers in Chmutovo move on from the traumatic recruiting events of 1819. The *soldatka* continued pleading for her husband's return and (most detrimentally) sustained her demands for special financial treatment. This brought her trouble on two fronts.

First, in asking for the return of a military recruit, Pelageia was threatening the commune's authority in distributing military obligations. Replies from the estate office and from Nikolai Borisovich Iusupov himself restate communal jurisdiction over these matters. "Her demand for the exchange of her husband is completely reckless;" reads a reply from the estate office, "for he was given with the agreement of the society…so to exchange him is no longer possible."[30] The office may have found her demand reckless because earlier, in August 1819, a petition was sent directly to Nikolai Borisovich Iusupov, bypassing the village commune and the estate office. Iusopov was somewhat sympathetic in his reply to Ul'ianov's mother, but ultimately he restates the proper hierarchy to her, that "because he Ul'ianov was sent through the agreement of the commune, then there is no need to return him."[31] By challenging the commune's decision to send Mikhail Ul'ianov, his wife placed herself at odds with the traditional subordinate role she was expected to fill. So Pelageia was out of line when she challenged the intermediate authorities in Chmutovo, but she also made enemies in other villagers.

The second factor which degraded Pelageia Iakovleva's status in Chmutovo over the long-term was the appearance of special treatment. If Pelageia was relieved of her *obrok* duties, as she continually requested, the money would have to be paid by her fellow villagers; or as Edgar Melton puts it, "one household's gain (a reduction in its share of rents and taxes, or having its males spared from

[30] Ibid., 167.
[31] Ibid., 164.

conscription) inevitably shifted the burden to another."[32] Indeed, when Mikhail Ivanov saved himself from conscription he condemned another household to dissolution. Ideally, all needy peasants including *soldatki* could rely on the commune for support. To be sure, the state and landowners did not consider poor relief to be one of their responsibilities; the office saw any cost incurred caring for the *soldatka* as an investment in the village's future prosperity; …for if in four years her oldest son is sent to [work at the factory in] Moscow, then will earn not just one person's quitrent, but even 2 and 3 persons' worth in one year, consequently the money you spent paying the soldier's wife Iakovleva's dues would not be lost capital, but rather given as a loan for only some time.[33]

Generally, communes or other societies to which Imperial subjects belonged preferred to slough off unproductive elements. In fact, Pelageia alleged that Dmitriev expressed out loud his desire to "drive [her] out of the village."[34] This unwelcoming attitude towards disruptive or unproductive members was typical, even if the estate office had trouble understanding why.

Deviation from gender obligations was a serious offence detrimental to collective wellbeing. Women out of step were regarded as polluting agents,

In one Old Believer tale, a demon washed away his pollution after visiting a whorehouse by using water in uncovered vessels in Christian homes. This water then caused illness among the believers. The moral is clear: the presence of immorality in the community brings affliction even to the righteous.[35]

Maintaining the social hierarchy was seen by Russians in all walks of life as a means to avoid chaos and ruin. The *soldatka* did not enter into her new role by choice. Just like their husbands, Dar'ia and later Pelageia used every recourse at their disposal to resist the draft. Unlike the soldiers, however, the *soldatka* remains in her village at least

[32] Edgar Melton, "Household Economies and Communal Conflicts on a Russian Serf Estate, 1800-1817" *Journal of Social History* 26, no.3 (Spring 1993), 560.
[33] Smith, "Authority in a Serf Village: Peasants, Managers, and the Role of Writing in Early Nineteenth Century Russia," 168.
[34] Ibid., 166.
[35] Eve Levin, *Sex and Society in the world of the orthodox Slavs, 900-1700* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989): 76

long enough to witness the destruction of her former life. Distrust, jealousy, and threats may ultimately drive her to leave or to subordinate herself to her neighbors.

Life in a serf village was characterized by relentless burdens and a sense of communal responsibility. Fulfilling the extravagant material demands of a landlord and the state was only possible through strict adherence to the common goal. Yet through the *mir*'s system of patronage, the collective burden was unequally distributed to punish or reward households – depending largely (but not entirely) on the personal bias of village elders. Since much of serf life was dictated by forces out of the village's control, distribution of responsibility took on an extraordinary social significance. The conscription dispute in Chmutovo illustrated all of this clearly, that the process of selecting a conscript was strategic and disciplinary, that social outliers such as *soldatki* were treated as unproductive and therefore villainous, and finally that appeals to a higher authority for reprieve were customary but narrowly acceptable. To expand on this last point, Chmutovo seemed supportive when Pelageia complained about Dmitriev's abuses (since his conduct affected every household), but she lost all support once her petitions began to resemble pleas for special treatment. Of course, the *soldatka* did endure a unique loss – one which, without support from the state, landlords, or the village, could be impossible for a single woman to overcome. The *soldatka* simply had no role in communal life, and became a liability as a result.

Alison Smith's translations made it possible to conduct a limited exploration into the role of the soldier's wife in her village and in the estate bureaucracy. Conflicts like the one in Chmutovo during 1819 and the early 1820s are represented to one degree or another in archived estate documents throughout the Russian Federation. Therein lies opportunity to further prove or disprove what has been discussed here; hopefully, the current limited body of research on the *soldatka* herself can be expanded. Thanks to the insights of Smith and other social historians of the Russian Imperial era who expend the additional effort to bring non-noblewomen's lives into focus.

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