

SLAVONIC & EAST EUROPEAN REVIEW



ISSN 2222-4327

Volume 102, Number 2, April 2024

Mikhail A. Belan, *The 1831 Cholera Riots in Staraja Russa*, pp. 287–309

Project MUSE, <https://doi.org/10.1353/see.00012>

<https://muse.jhu.edu/journal/823>

<https://www.jstor.org/journal/slaveasteurorev2>

Copyright in the individual articles and reviews published in the *Slavonic and East European Review* is vested in the authors. For permission to reproduce material, please apply to the Managing Editor (seer@ucl.ac.uk).

The Modern Humanities Research Association and the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College London

The 1831 Cholera Riots in Staraiia Russa

MIKHAIL A. BELAN

THE study of urban riots helps us to understand evolving relationships between townspeople and the authorities at a variety of levels: the people's views of those authorities, the reasons for their dissatisfaction with them and the attitude of officials towards the people. In the case of Russia, historians have largely focused on the seventeenth century, known for its urban riots, and on the plague riot of 1771 in Moscow.¹ By comparison, riots in St Petersburg, Sevastopol', Tambov and Staraiia Russa during the cholera epidemic of 1830–31 remain little studied.² Whereas spontaneous and poorly organized riots were quickly suppressed, those on 11–12 and 21–23 July 1831 at Staraiia Russa — the largest district capital of Novgorod province and, after 1825, a centre of military colonies — deserve greater attention. While Pavel Evstaf'ev has tried to examine holistically the riots in Staraiia Russa and neighbouring villages,³ research on the actions and trial of the townspeople themselves is limited. They form the focus of this article.

Once the town's merchants, *meshchane* (middle- and lower-income townsmen)⁴ and worker soldiers had rioted on the evening of 11 July 1831,

Mikhail A. Belan is a Research Fellow at the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE University), St Petersburg.

I am grateful to colleagues from HSE University, St Petersburg and NovSU, where I gave papers at the seminars of the study group, 'Practices of Urban Development in the Russian Political Space of the Late XV–early XVII Century: Man and the Small Town'. I am especially indebted to Adrian Selin, Simon Dixon and the *SEER* reviewers for their valuable comments and criticism. All dates are given in Old Style.

¹ See, among many, Adrian Selin, *Smuta na Severo-Zapade v nachale 17 veka: ocherki iz zhizni novgorodskogo obshchestva*, St Petersburg, 2017; Valerie A. Kivelson, 'The Devil Stole His Mind: The Tsar and the 1648 Moscow Uprising', *American Historical Review*, 93, 3, 1993, pp. 733–56, and John T. Alexander, *Bubonic Plague in Early Modern Russia: Public Health and Urban Disaster*, Baltimore, MD, 1980, pp. 177–201.

² The standard outline of the epidemic remains Roderick E. McGrew, *Russia and the Cholera, 1825–1832*, Madison, WI, 1965.

³ Pavel Evstaf'ev, *Vosstanie voennykh poselians Novgorodskoi gubernii v 1831 godu*, Moscow, 1934.

⁴ According to Catherine II's Charter to the Towns, the Russian town was presented

violence spread fast across the districts of the military colonies around Lake Il'men, threatening Novgorod and St Petersburg. Many reliable regular battalions from the colonies and the capital were at that time stationed in the Kingdom of Poland or at summer camp. By late July, however, the authorities had pacified the soldiers of the 10th worker battalion, along with the people of Staraia Russa and the military colonists. A military investigation Commission (hereafter, the Commission), presided over by Count A. F. Orlov, opened in Novgorod, with a branch in Staraia Russa, and reached verdicts on the actions of 139 merchants and *meshchane* on 25 November 1831.⁵

As the first analysis of the investigation and trial of the townspeople of Staraia Russa, this article opens new avenues to examining the views and ideas of the people towards the authorities, and the positions and attitudes of the authorities towards the people. Charges, affidavits of those arrested, victims and witnesses, reports of the officers restoring order are juxtaposed. The article examines individual cases of the accused merchants and *meshchane*. Based on a combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis, it sets out the concerns and views of the people, highlighting personal issues and those felt more generally, and reflects on the attitude of the authorities towards various categories of the accused and various types of offences.

The article aims: 1) to set out the actions of merchants, *meshchane* and the council on 11–12 July (exploring individual issues and building 'collective portraits');⁶ 2) to examine the position of the authorities — that is the attitude of the Commission to various categories of people and misdeeds, comparing accusations and penalties; 3) to explore both the triggers of the riot and the deeper reasons for popular dissatisfaction with the authorities, both individually and more generally; 4) to examine

in 1785 with revised social categories and political institutions: in each town reforms aimed to introduce six communes consisting of six legal categories of residents. The membership implied legal status — certain duties and privileges, applied to all families registered to that commune. But communes of merchants and *meshchane* encompassed almost all families. *Meshchane* were lower- and middle-income families, who paid poll tax and provided recruits; merchants constituted an urban upper class, excused levies and corporal punishments, who paid an annual family capital fee. Both were subject to billeting. Pavel Ryndziunskii, *Gorodskoe grazhdanstvo doreformennoi Rossii*, Moscow, 1958, pp. 42–47.

⁵ Evidently, the number of rioters exceeded the 139 individuals investigated by the Commission. On arrival in the town in July 1831, Major Iasinskii reported: 'The larger part of the *meshchane* of Staraia Russa are involved in disturbances.' See Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Voennyi Istoricheskii Arkhiv (RGVIA), f. 405, op. 1, no. 5573, l. 5 ob.

⁶ Selin, *Smuta na Severo-Zapade v nachale 17 veka*, p. 8.

the role of the local elite (the council,⁷ elite merchants) in the riot; 5) to determine whether the study of the investigation and trial allows us to speak of changing views or new ideas among the Russian townspeople in the period after the Napoleonic wars — and if so, what were the reasons behind this.

The study is based on previously untapped sources — the files of the Commission on 139 civilian merchants and *meshchane*, kept at the Russian State Military Historical Archive in the collection of the Military Colonies (Fond 405).⁸ The documents are largely arranged according to four categories of charge. All four carried a penalty of a full term of army service. The three most serious charges carried in addition a penalty of various forms of corporal punishment. File no. 5575 is especially important, containing the list of final accusations, replies, testimonies and verdicts reached by the Commission for cases in all four categories. Additionally, recourse has been had to the file on rioters from among the townspeople in the archive of the Staraiia Russa council, discovered in the Novgorod Regional Archive.⁹

The article first outlines the actions of the urban rioters. The second part, focusing on the investigation of 139 individuals and their subsequent trial and punishment, analyses the position of the authorities and the attitudes demonstrated by the military Commission. The article's third section scrutinizes the role in the riot of the urban elite, merchants of the council. The fourth part examines specific reasons, personal and common, for dissatisfaction among the townspeople regarding the authorities. A final section explores the broader views of the townspeople regarding the authorities in the period after the Napoleonic wars, setting the Staraiia Russa riots in context and suggesting reasons for changing popular perceptions of the authorities.

⁷ The Charter also introduced limited urban-level self-government, with authority over communes: elected *duma* 'council' and *town head* 'mayor', who were to control the communes, appoint meetings, supervise collections of taxes, recruits, billeting, receive orders and send reports to the Governor. Councils were to be elected by all categories and were to include representatives of all six communes. But only merchants and *meshchane* communes took part in urban business and elections, with councils consisting almost exclusively of the wealthiest merchant families (a higher qualification applied to vote and to be elected). Boris Mironov, *Sotsial'naiia istoriia Rossii perioda imperii (XVIII–nachalo XX v.)*, 2 vols, St Petersburg, 2003, 2, pp. 495–98.

⁸ The following files of the Commission have been examined: RG VIA, f. 405, op. 2, no. 5397, no. 5340, no. 5415, no. 5465, and the most informative files on townspeople — nos 5572–82, no. 5583, no. 5585, no. 5586, no. 5593, no. 5597, no. 5598, especially — no. 5575 (final summary of all accusation, replies, and sentences).

⁹ Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Novgorodskoi Oblasti (GANO), f. 773, op. 1, l. 8.

Staraia Russa in 1831: The participation of townspeople in the cholera riot on 11–12 July

At the beginning of the nineteenth century Staraia Russa was a traditional, fairly prosperous, middle-sized centre of north-western Russia; it was the second largest town in the province after Novgorod. The urban economy largely relied on the production of salt, manufactured in both large- and small-scale enterprises.¹⁰ In the early sixteenth century Sigismund von Herberstein mentioned the salt lake within the town boundaries, from which residents extracted salt; in the 1580s Giles Fletcher wrote of 500 larger and smaller *varnitsy* (saltworks), naming the local salt as the best in the country.¹¹ In 1775, a large salt-producing plant was opened, the biggest enterprise in the province.¹² The merchant commune was more numerous here than in many other district centres of the Russian North-West: wealthy families, including those of the second guild, held the main elected posts of town head, headman and members of the council.¹³ In the early 1790s, there were 242 merchants here; in addition to salt production and trade, the thirty-nine richest families were engaged in the purchase and sale of flax, hemp, fish, oak and pine wood to St Petersburg. There were two brick factories in the town, a rope factory, a distillery and several small tanneries employing between three and five workers. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, a sawmill was opened, whilst 30,000 pounds of flax were sold every year abroad and to the famous Alexandrine Factory in St Petersburg. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, the salt business began to decline:¹⁴ in the 1780s, 200,000 pounds of salt was manufactured annually, in 1813 — 166,000 pounds, and in 1837 — 154,000 (salt was mostly sold in Novgorod and Pskov provinces). But in the 1820s there were still fairly large, vibrant communes of merchants and *meshchane*, with an influential council presiding over the town.

In 1825, however, an edict of Alexander I turned the town into a centre of the Staraia Russa district of the military colonies, located around Lake Il'men.¹⁵ Over the next couple of years, the offices of the higher commanders

¹⁰ A standard account of salt production and the early history of Staraia Russa is Guta Rabinovich, *Gorod soli: Staraia Russa v kontse XVI–seredine XVIII vv.*, Leningrad, 1973.

¹¹ Mark Polianskii, *Illustrirovannyi istoriko-statisticheskii ocherk goroda Staroi Russy i Starorusskogo uezda*, Novgorod, 1885, p. 22.

¹² Vladimir Pyliaev, *Staraia Russa: Istoricheskii ocherk goroda*, Sergiev Posad, 1916, p. 36.

¹³ The merchant reform of 1775 had introduced three guilds, based on the size of the family capital declared every year. Merchant communes in district towns of the North-West consisted almost exclusively of families of the lowest, third guild, and a few of the second, who held elected posts. Ryndziunskii, *Gorodskoe grazhdanstvo*, p. 42.

¹⁴ Ivan Viazinin, *Staraia Russa v istorii Rossii*, Novgorod, 1994, pp. 105–20.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

of the military colonies were moved to the town, with a lot of military personnel — senior and junior officers, clerks, soldiers — duly arriving and workshops, stables and warehouses being located there. The civilian part of the town was preserved: the council and town head continued to oversee the merchants and *meshchane*; most families continued with their usual occupations and business.¹⁶ But inevitably, the everyday life of the town — the economic activity of the people, the decisions of the council and communes — was heavily influenced from the mid 1820s onwards by the constant presence of the colony's commanders, officers and soldiers, along with its military offices and facilities. In political terms, the life of the people was made subject to decisions of the military commanders and not the civil governor: Staraiia Russa became the first town brought under the control of the military authorities. Economic activity shrank:¹⁷ local industry often failed to compete with military enterprises (for example, the military largely took control of the grain trade and established their own sawmills); many residents now had to fulfil the needs of the officers and soldiers, with the military often setting prices.¹⁸ The military were not removed from the town until 1859, following the liquidation of the military colonies.

The Commission established the following course of events.¹⁹ July 1831 was hot; people were disturbed by the unusual measures taken to combat cholera. In the days prior to the riot, several incidents caused alarm among the residents and soldiers. On 9 July a boy, the servant of a captain, walked down the street with a bundle of salt. The *meshchanka* Sikavina saw him near the well and shouted that he had put a pinch of poison into her buckets, following orders from the officers; a crowd assembled. On the evening of 10 July, the *meshchanin* Vorob'ev saw an officer walking near the river, grabbed him and took him to the chief of police, Mandzhos, telling everybody that he had captured a poisoner who was poisoning the water. Mandzhos freed the lieutenant and arrested Vorob'ev, occasioning great discontent among the residents: 'The excitement was growing;

¹⁶ Richard Pipes, 'The Russian Military Colonies, 1810–1831', *The Journal of Modern History*, 22, 3, 1950, pp. 211–13; Janet M. Hartley, *Russia, 1762–1825: Military Power, the State and the People*, Westport, CT, 2008, pp. 200–05; Oleg Matveev, 'Vosstanie 1831 goda v Novgorodskikh voennykh poseleniakh', *Novgorodskii arkhivnyi vestnik*, 3, 2002, pp. 58–70.

¹⁷ Pyliaev, *Staraiia Russa*, pp. 44–47.

¹⁸ See Alexander Bitis and Janet M. Hartley, 'The Russian Military Colonies in 1826', *Slavonic and East European Review*, 78, 2, 2000, pp. 321–30 (p. 323).

¹⁹ The following summary draws on the detailed chronology of the riot in Evstaf'ev, *Vosstanie voennykh poselian*, pp. 113–21.

merchants and *meshchane* gathered on the city bridge, on the square, on the streets, quietly talking among themselves.²⁰

On 11 July, the officers ordered the baths to be fumigated. The 10th worker battalion refused to wash. In the evening soldiers mutinied and moved to the centre. The soldiers beat up the captain, other officers fled; the police bailiff who tried to help was beaten by both soldiers and townspeople. The bell rang; residents and soldiers ran about the streets on the lookout for their superiors and others they suspected. They smashed the police and council office, looking for the chief of police (but took no money from any of the offices they entered); the pharmacy was ransacked, the pharmacist killed.

Though Mandzhos was an unpopular chief of police — known for keeping those he arrested for days on bread and water²¹ — he was nevertheless a resolute man. He assembled the policemen and fire team, and called on some merchants and their sons, one of whom was sent to the town head Severiakov for help. But the town head fled when he saw what was happening, ‘hiding in the forest for three days in great fear.’²² Mandzhos told his men and the residents who had arrived to take up cudgels and accompany him to face the rioters; but his attempts to get the townspeople to arm failed, with one of them openly abusing the Chief of Police and refusing to help. Mandzhos then advanced with his squad to face the crowd; but as he saw the number of rioters, he ordered his men to hide; he himself was spotted hiding in a merchant’s backyard, where a *meshchanka* noticed him and shouted, ‘Over here, over here!’ The soldiers and townspeople dragged Mandzhos to the square, beating him to death. His body was left lying there: the next day some old men from the town were seen kicking the body.²³

Meanwhile, the highest officer in the town, the head of the construction office Major General Meves, rode to the square in parade uniform, addressing the crowd and almost persuading it to disperse; but someone cried ‘Take him!’ — and Meves, ‘a kind old gentleman’, was soon dead.²⁴ The rioters continued hunting down officers, some of whom hid or fled. Some were found, beaten, arrested and brought to the square, where they were put under lock and key, awaiting ‘a trial’.²⁵

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 113–14.

²¹ Ibid., pp. 107.

²² Ibid., p. 116.

²³ Ibid., p. 117.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

As part of the crowd, consisting of some thirty or forty men, was passing the Spaso-Preobrazhenskii monastery, the archimandrite Serafim tried to speak to them from a window (he noted that there were no soldiers, only merchants of the third guild, *meshchane* and servants). When asked who they were looking for, the merchant A. Kuznetsov²⁶ told him excitedly about the *meshchanin* Vorob'ev capturing the poisoner; how he was now being held by the chief of police who was threatening him; angry voices shouted that they were looking for Mandzhos and his superiors. For a while, they listened to Serafim, then a young *meshchanin* shouted: 'Don't listen or we won't get anywhere!', and the angry crowd continued on their way.²⁷

All night there was riot in the town — sounds of the bell, cracking wood, breaking glass, shots and whistles, the cries of people being beaten and killed. At dawn on 12 July several elite merchants came to the archimandrite to seek his advice on stopping the riot. Serafim advised them to send immediately to General Leont'ev at summer camp asking him to send up the regular battalions.

A new messenger soon came to Serafim, with a request from the merchant elite to go to the square, to take part in the trial of the officers on charges of treachery and poisoning: 'tables, paper and ink, samples of poison [were] prepared'.²⁸ Though Serafim tried every means to refuse, it was evident that these merchants supported the riot. New messengers came, threatening that a force of worker soldiers would come and drag him down to the square if he did not come of his own accord: Serafim and the priests put on their robes and went to the square.

Processing in a *krestnyi khod* (icon procession), the clergy arrived at the square and held a church service; by the end the service, Serafim noted, the priests and some of the merchant elite had slipped away. He later claimed that he had only come to stop the riot but was forced by the merchants and soldiers to take an active part, being made a chairman of a jury, which included the main merchants of the town, a sergeant and a scribe of the 10th battalion. They sat at a table covered with red cloth, brought to the middle of the square from the town council. The jury made Serafim smell various powders, which made him feel bad. The jury questioned the officers and officials, as they were brought one by one from the prison, securing from each an admission of guilt that they were plotting against the townspeople

²⁶ Evstaf'ev describes this merchant as Zakharov. See *ibid.*, p. 118.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ For Serafim's letter, explaining that he had been forced to join the trial of the officials, see *ibid.*, pp. 122–23.

and the rank and file, intending to poison and kill them. Serafim tried to take no part but was forced to do so by the rioters who threatened to crush the entire town: he persuaded the army doctor Bogorodskii, who had been so badly beaten he was unable to sign, to confess. Importantly, the officers' testimonies were signed not only by the jury but by many merchants and *meshchane* in the square (for example, Bogorodskii's testimony was signed by twelve merchants and thirty-one *meshchane*). The officers were then placed again under lock and key, guarded by soldiers and *meshchane*.²⁹

The riot assumed a more orderly character: the bloodshed stopped; the town headman Solodovnikov, supported by several elite merchants, took command, with the assistance of other merchants, *meshchane* and soldiers. He ordered guard posts manned by *meshchane* to be set up at all roads from the town. (When a local noble Bolotnikov rode into the town, he was arrested, questioned and placed under lock and key.)³⁰ Solodovnikov ordered certain officers to be put in chains³¹ and to free *meshchanin* Vorob'ev, who was sent with soldiers to check the food in the hospital. (They tried to arrest the doctor, who was only saved by his patients.)³² Meanwhile, some worker soldiers and *meshchane* had gone out to nearby villages, spreading riot in the area of the colonies.

Informed at camp of these disturbances, General Leont'ev dispatched the battalion of Major Iasinskii, instructing him to restore order without resorting to force. The head of the military colonies sent more troops from Novgorod. Some villages supported the riot, but many did not: the generals were disposed to restore order peaceably, as many reliable, regular army troops were away. But orders soon arrived from Nicholas I, requiring all necessary measures to stop the riot at once. The tsar also ordered an inquiry into its causes, to see whether the unpopular anti-cholera measures of which he heard could have inflamed it, or whether there were deeper grounds. He also ordered a search for possible instigators who might have come from St Petersburg, where a similar riot had occurred on 22 July.³³

Late in the evening of 12 July, Major Iasinskii arrived with his battalion, meeting outside the town the archimandrite Serafim, who had fled after the trial. After minor incidents they reached the square, freed the arrested officers, 'cleared the square without force of townspeople and soldiers, who were there in great number despite the late hour', and posted soldiers

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 123.

³¹ Ibid., p. 124.

³² Ibid., p. 123.

³³ Ibid., p. 129.

at all main points. Major Iasinskii, with a company, approached the town council, where he found a meeting of some twenty merchants and *meshchane* of the local elite, headed by the merchant Solodovnikov, who met Iasinskii in the doorway, saying that they were discussing how to restore order. The major sent everyone home, requesting Solodovnikov to stay behind for future orders.³⁴

The *meshchane*, merchants and soldiers calmed down, but no arrests followed: the situation remained tense; many soldiers who arrived were unreliable. On 21 July the worker soldiers rioted again, but the townspeople stayed at home: streets remained empty, windows closed. Finally, loyal cavalry troops under the command of General Mikulin arrived, restoring order; the General was met by a delegation of the frightened merchants of Staraia Russa, and on 27 July the 10th worker battalion was removed from the town. It took some time to pacify the rioting in villages, after which a Commission was set up to investigate the actions of the soldiers, townspeople and colonists involved.

The position and attitude of the authorities: Investigation, trial and punishment

Orlov's Commission scrutinized the actions of 139 merchants and *meshchane*. Charges (one or, more often, several), replies of the accused, and testimonies of victims and witnesses were organized in four categories (summarised in file no. 5775) and on 25 November verdicts were delivered. All categories of charges implied confinement to the army for a full term of service (to Finland, to worker battalions and so on), but categories one to three also implied heavy corporal punishment, beating by knout or running the gauntlet (*spitsruten*), a penalty that often led to death. The military authorities conducted the investigation and trial: the exemption from corporal punishment for merchants, granted in 1775, could thus be ignored.

Whereas for many of the accused only a brief, generic charge survives (presence on the square during the service, signed confessions of officials and so on), more information is available about the principal rioters. Covering merchants and merchants' sons of the third guild, several merchants of the council and the second guild, *meshchane* and widows (see below), the database of 139 cases investigated by the Commission may be taken as reasonably representative. The number of the accused and the deeds imputed to them reflect the composition of the town and correlate with social status. Fewer merchants than *meshchane* were arrested, but all

³⁴ Ibid. p. 131.

of them were treated as organizers of the riot. General calculations and the analysis of individual cases — namely, those concerning the main rioters — allow us to reconstruct the attitudes of the Commission and thus to evaluate the position of the authorities.

Of the 139 accused, only six were women:³⁵ these faced charges for ‘minor’ offences such as helping to spot hidden officers or selling looted goods. They were sent to the civil governor, to be tried in the civil court, and their ultimate fate is unknown.

Of the 133 men charged, a few were released, including only three of the forty-five merchants arrested: namely, Iakov Bulin, Iakov Balakhontsev and the merchant’s son Ivan Potykalov, who had stood up for the officers and officials. All three belonged to the local elite. Bulin (forty-two years old) and *ratman* ‘magistrate’ Balakhontsev (fifty-five) were in the small group of elite merchants who came to ask for advice from archimandrite Serafim on the morning of 12 July.³⁶ Balakhontsev later defended police bailiff Dirin and doctor Peshkov from being beaten; whilst Bulin, both on the square and in council premises, had stood up for two officials, for which he was also attacked by the rioters. Bulin had also not hesitated to expel the rioters from his yard, when they had climbed onto the roof of his barn, where the auditor Savel’ev was hiding.³⁷ All other elite merchants, who had visited the archimandrite, were sentenced to first category punishment, including Iakov’s brother, burgomaster Vasilii Balakhontsev. Vasilii hid at the beginning of the riot (he asked the servant to lock him and his family in the barn) but on 12 July was one of the two messengers sent to General Leont’ev, which, however, did not help him.³⁸

The charges, applied both to merchants and *meshchane*, can be divided into two kinds: the typical and the more interesting cases. The most common charges were: 1) countersigning confessions of the officers and officials: many *meshchane* claimed that merchants, both on the square and in the council premises, had forced them to sign, when they did not understand what they were signing (most *meshchane*, however, signed for themselves, meaning they were literate to some extent); 2) presence

³⁵ A merchant’s wife, a *meshchanka* wife, two *meshchane* girls, a soldier’s widow and a soldier’s wife.

³⁶ Many of the merchants of the local elite, who had visited the archimandrite in the morning, appear among the list of donors’ names for the militia levy in 1812 from Staraia Russa. Polianskii, *Ilustrirovannyi*, p. 48.

³⁷ RGVIA, f. 405, op. 2, no. 5593, ll. 10–12, testimony of the auditor Saveliev about the events of the riot, September 1831.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, no. 5572, ll. 4–5, statement of the burgomaster, merchant of the third guild Vasilii Potapov Balakhontsev, August 1831.

on the square on 23 July, or on the streets at night — sometimes with no further action reported, sometimes carrying a cudgel; 3) actions of greater severity: running with a cudgel, shouting, breaking windows, abusing officers, helping soldiers spot officers; 4) serious offences: physical assault, manacled prisoners, spreading rumours of false decrees.

*Table 1: Merchants and 'meshchane' of Staraiia Russa found guilty and convicted for their actions*³⁹

Found guilty		Category	Punishment
Merchants	<i>Meshchane</i>		
42		1	beaten (knout); sent to army
	5	2	beaten (<i>spitsruten</i>); sent to army
	7	3	beaten (<i>spitsruten/rod</i>); sent to army
	61	4	sent to army without beating
In total: 42 out of 45 examined	In total: 73 out of 88 examined	In total: 115 out of 139 found guilty and sentenced 12 <i>meshchane</i> , 3 merchants released; 3 <i>meshchane</i> died; 1 not found. 6 women sent to the civil governor to be tried by civil court	

Of the eighty-eight accused *meshchane*, three died during the investigation; one, who signed officials' confessions, was not found in the tax list (he may have given a false name). It is noteworthy that the *meshchane* commune itself handed over several rioters to the Commission⁴⁰ — and as one *meshchanin* complained, 'those who really beat the superiors, but are rich, stay at home, and those who were not in the riot, but are poor, are punished and handed over'.⁴¹ Eventually, seventy-three *meshchane* were found guilty. But most of them (sixty-two men) were only accused and sentenced to a fourth category penalty.⁴² Twelve men accused, like most *meshchane*, of insignificant misdeeds in the fourth category (shouting, running about the streets, seen on the square with rioters), were even

³⁹ The table is based on RGVIA, f. 405, op. 1, no. 5575, ll. 2–16 ob.

⁴⁰ GANO, f. 773, op. 1, no. 8, l. 50, Duma to the Commission on handing the list of rioters from *meshchane* (67 names), 11 December 1831.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, l. 98.

⁴² Evstaf'ev, *Vosstanie voennykh poselian*, pp. 234–35.

released or excused beating — very likely due to lack of evidence (two men confessed without evidence) or old age; and several of these men had also tried to offer some help to policemen, officers and officials during the riot.

The Commission's disproportionate assessment of the severity of actions is noticeable: the authorities considered merchants much more guilty than others. Except for the three men released, all forty-two of the merchants arrested were found guilty of first-category offences (this was true of both ordinary merchants and those from the elite). The same charges in the cases of merchants and *meshchane* were treated very differently. The most frequent charge was that of signing the testimonies of the officials. Dozens of *meshchane* who signed were all designated fourth category; some were even freed. Merchants who signed the testimonies, however, received severe first-category punishment. Another frequent accusation was that of 'running across the town with a cudgel', 'shouting like a villain'⁴³ — for such actions, *meshchane* received only a fourth category sentence; the merchants a first. And even those *meshchane* most severely accused (on charges of assaulting superiors or spreading false rumours about imperial decrees there were only twelve such men) did not receive first degree punishment, even if witnesses testified against them. By contrast, those merchants who were merely seen on the square on 12 July, or on the streets at night, not doing anything, were all sentenced to first-category punishment.

It seems that merchants were regarded by the authorities as the main bulwark of the town's stability, held responsible for the council administration, collection of taxes and often providing additional help for *meshchane* communes. Punishment for them was therefore all the more severe, whatever the charges were: from the actions of the town head Severiakov, secretary of the council V. Sokolov (who organized the trial), or those who beat officers, to those who just signed testimonies along with the *meshchane*, or who simply joined in the general clamour of the crowd.

The urban elite and the riot: The positions of the council and leading merchants of the town

When it comes to outlining the positions of the elite — the most influential merchants, magistrates and council members — it has already been seen that some (the town head, the burgomaster) hid and ran when the riot began. Apparently, there was fright and confusion among the local elite, as evidenced by the dawn visit of merchants to the archimandrite. But on

⁴³ RGVIA, f. 405, op. 1, no. 5575, ll. 3–15.

the morning of 12 July some merchants tried to take control of the town and restore order. Town headman Solodovnikov, assisted by the council secretary Vasilii Sokolov, played the most important role: according to many of the confessions, it was Solodovnikov who ordered people summoned to the square, organized the trial and the signing of confessions by the officials; later Solodovnikov and his associates tried to keep the order in the town and prevent new bloodshed and violence, actively giving orders to *meshchane* street headmen and soldiers. (*Meshchane* Ia. Egorov and P. Gnutikov confessed to detaining the officers and helping to bind and chain them on the orders of headman Solodovnikov.)⁴⁴

Later, many witnesses tried to shift all responsibility to Solodovnikov and several of his close associates. In their turn, Solodovnikov and Sokolov claimed that they were only forced by the worker soldiers to arrange the trial, summon people to the square and organize the signings; and they did it all only in an attempt to pacify the rioting battalion. However, there were only two soldiers on the jury: all its other members were elite merchants. And many witnesses stated that throughout the day of 12 July, activity was in full swing in the council premises, with merchants and soldiers making decisions and giving orders: Sokolov was seen all that time drawing up papers, and whispering with soldiers. Solodovnikov, Sokolov and Sokolov's brother as good as forced many *meshchane* to sign. They freed U. Vorob'ev and sent him to check the hospital, ordered the detention and fettering of officials and posted *meshchane* and soldiers on the roads. According to Major Iasinskii's statement, about twenty merchants in the council, presided over by Solodovnikov, discussed how to restore order until late into the night.⁴⁵

Nonetheless, it cannot be assumed that the riot of 12 July was supported by most of the elite: except for those who disappeared, some wealthy merchants and *meshchane* were not afraid to stand up for the officers and officials; some of them hid officers in their homes or helped them leave the town; merchants Bulin and Ia. Balakhontsev were also among the few who openly refused to sign the officials' confessions.

Evidently, during the riot there was confrontation and disagreement among the elite, as well as simple fear and confusion. In the middle of the riot, one *meshchanin* M. Matveev shouted at the merchants: 'You are traitors, you are *zaugolniki* (hiding in corners) in refusing to go to the

⁴⁴ RGVIA, f. 405, op. 1, no. 5576, l. 2, verdict of the commission on the guilty P. Gnutikov, Ia. Egorov, M. Shaposhnikov, 25 November 1831.

⁴⁵ Major Iasinskii's report in Evstaf'ev, *Vosstanie*, pp. 130–31.

square'.⁴⁶ The merchants, he believed, as the urban elite responsible for the town, were cowards and failing in their duty: 'You are hiding in vain, it is you who ought to be standing up to the worker battalion!'⁴⁷ As we can see, the position of the Commission — that merchants were much more guilty (all those merchants who were arraigned, that is, no matter what they did) — was not entirely without reason.

It is evident that a significant part of the elite on 12 July acted in concert with the rebellious battalion. Many, however, seem to have done so with the commendable (if belated) intention of preventing further bloodshed and saving the town from rioting soldiers and angry, agitated townspeople. Although many of the leading men of the town (town headman Solodovnikov, the brothers Sokolov) were involved in this initial collusion with the rioters, not all their members supported it. However, those who opposed the riot were not ready to risk confronting the soldiers and the council openly. Several of them, including the town head, took fright and fled, or hid (some preferring not to leave home). But there were men who tried to oppose the rioters individually: either protecting hunted officers and officials or hiding them, or helping them to escape from the town. Among these were men (such as Bulin, Ia. Balakhontsev, Potykalov) from the most respected families, as well as a number of ordinary merchants and *meshchane*.

Lastly, two files from the early 1840s, found in the RGVIA archive, shed light on the destiny of several men sentenced in Staraia Russa for the riot. Families — usually sons or wives — petitioned the authorities in 1840–41, asking for their men to be transferred to military units closer to home.⁴⁸ About ten such petitions have been discovered. Most men served in Finland, a couple in the navy. It seems these petitions were all approved: the men were transferred to finish their military service, almost all to local watch squads — most to the forty-first and forty-second squads in Staraia Russa.⁴⁹ (In 1842 the authorities complained that the men who returned and were now serving in these squads 'have relaxed to such a degree that they

⁴⁶ GANO, f. 773, op. 1, no. 8, l. 50, Duma to the Commission on presenting the list of *meshchane* rioters (67 names), 11 December 1831.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ RGVIA, f. 399, op. 1, d. 161, ll. 1–28 ob., petitions, July 1841–May 1842.

⁴⁹ The internal watch corps (established in 1811) included local battalions, also known as garrison battalions or *invalidnye komandy*, 'invalid squads'. The watch corps was separate from the standing army: its battalions were scattered across Russian towns and mostly used for maintaining local order. They were manned by older soldiers incapacitated by injury or poor health, who could end their service in the local watch battalions on fairly relaxed terms, commonly considered by the rank and file as a reward, a kind of a pension.

wear civilian dress every day though it was only allowed on holidays.)⁵⁰ Among the men who returned, most were *meshchane*, who had received lighter punishments, but there were at least two former merchants who had been active rioters in 1831: Solodovnikov and I. Sumriakov. Kozma Solodovnikov, the town headman and one of the main accused,⁵¹ had survived both the punishment and the years of service. Ivan Sumriakov, once his wife's petition was approved, was sent to continue service close to home, being 'seconded to the central offices of the military colonies'.⁵² As educated men, both Solodovnikov and Sumriakov enjoyed promotion in the military, serving by the early 1840s as NCOs (merchants, as literate men, often enjoyed good careers in the army and military offices).⁵³

The townspeople: Personal and general reasons for dissatisfaction towards the authorities

The official version of the investigation confirmed that the riotous actions of the commoners, like that of the soldiers, was of a sporadic nature. The trigger was dissatisfaction with unpopular anti-cholera measures, and widespread rumours prior to the riot — among 'easily deceivable townspeople and the rank and file'⁵⁴ — regarding the poisoning of people by officers and superiors (although already during the riot the tsar had received reports that anti-cholera measures had been merely the catalyst for the people to vent their long-accumulated hatred towards the military colonies).⁵⁵ To an extent, the accusations, replies and witness testimonies confirm that the suspicious actions of the military authorities constituted the immediate catalyst. But a study of some of the charges give us a closer glimpse of conflicts in the town and of the deeper grounds of dissatisfaction towards the authorities.⁵⁶

Many, it seems, had grievances against the police: both merchants and *meshchane* had participated in the attacks on bailiffs and policemen; several publicly called for police officers to be beaten up or killed; others searched out specific police officers and officials to settle their own

⁵⁰ RGVIA, f. 399, op. 1, d. 166, ll. 11–11 ob., Major General Nabokov on the behaviour of men returned from Finland to serve in invalid squads, 21 August 1842.

⁵¹ RGVIA, f. 399, op. 1, d. 161, ll. 3–40b., petition of K. Solodovnikov's son, 29 September 1841.

⁵² *Ibid.*, l. 9, petition of I. Sumriakov's wife, 12 November 1841.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, ll. 6–7v.

⁵⁴ Evstaf'ev, *Vosstanie voennykh posel'ian*, p. 129.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

⁵⁶ Based on the files with testimonies of those accused. RGVIA, f. 405, op. 1, d. 4475, d. 5576, d. 5577, d. 5578.

scores. Merchant I. Ptitsyn allegedly ran along shouting, ‘Kill them! Hang all policemen! We’ll break the first head and hang everyone there!’⁵⁷ Merchant’s son M. Shaposhnikov shouted abuse at the policemen, urging people to kill them all; and he himself manhandled one, nearly killing him, demanding from his victim the whereabouts of the chief of police, the warden, and the bailiff.⁵⁸ Merchant’s son Nikolai Lapin was the first to strike the chief of police with a cudgel, encouraging worker soldiers to follow suit. Merchant’s son Andrei Kuznetsov was one of the first rioters: that night, on the Tikhvinskii Bridge, he called out to worker soldiers, ‘Here, our men are here! We must kill the chief of police!’⁵⁹ Merchant E. Plotnikov forcibly dragged two women, one of whom was the sister of the police bailiff Dirin, to the square for punishment, not listening to requests of some men to let them go; only on the square was he persuaded to let the women alone.⁶⁰ The *meshchane* behaved similarly: Petr Korostynskii beat up the warden at the Krestetskaia street booth; at his instigation the worker soldiers ran to the city centre.⁶¹ Aleksandr Teslov looked all over the town for the bailiff Zhukov: ‘Teslov seized the non-commissioned officer of the police Ptitsyn by the chest, attempting to beat him and saying “You know how they carried the poison all around, you all know!”; at the sentry box he shouted obscene abuse at police sentry Kuragaev, asking where Zhukov was to be found’;⁶² Vasilii Khlebnikov threatened police NCO P. Storozhenov: ‘What do you think? Now we’ll do the same to you as we did to Mandzhos! Take him!’⁶³

Behind this acute dissatisfaction with the police and military authorities lay both personal grievances and general exasperation at the military and police administration, and the numerous duties with which the populace was burdened. In particular, many were dissatisfied with the demands of billeting, and the supplies and services that the military and police required of them. One merchant testified that a bailiff had arrived at his home before the riot and, hearing the merchant’s complaints about

⁵⁷ RGVIA, f. 405, op. 1, d. 5575. l. 7.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ RGVIA, f. 405, op. 1, d. 5575. l. 27 ob., verdict on the merchant’s son Andrei Kuznetsov, 25 November 1831.

⁶⁰ RGVIA, f. 405, op. 1, no. 5576, l. 29, statement of the 3rd guild merchant Liadin about the misdeeds of the 3rd guild merchant E. Plotnikov, 5 September 1831.

⁶¹ RGVIA, f. 405, op. 1, d. 5575, l. 25 ob., verdict on the *meshchanin* Petr Korostynskii, 25 November 1831.

⁶² Ibid., ll. 9 ob.–10, verdict on the *meshchanin* Aleksandr Teslov, 25 November 1831.

⁶³ Ibid., ll. 1–1 ob., verdict on the *meshchanin* Vasilii Khlebnikov, 25 November 1831.

billeting, said: 'If we order it, you'll house ten, twenty, fifty soldiers!'⁶⁴ When flogging officers on the square, another merchant, A. Vasil'ev, was heard to say: 'We feed you, take you into our house, and you poison us!'⁶⁵

Many testimonies reveal distrust, suspicion and open hatred towards 'Germans' and 'Poles' — officers, medics and clerks, many of whom had non-Russian names. As mentioned above, the pharmacy was ransacked and the pharmacist Wagner fell first victim to the riot.⁶⁶ During the trial, a statement was taken from Captain Shakhovskoi that the chief of police had persuaded him to take poison from Major Rosenmeister and poison the people (promising him security from prosecution in the military court). Major Rosenmeister was very unpopular with the soldiers.⁶⁷ Shakhovskoi also named two lieutenants and the surveyor Kashubskii as traitors and poisoners: 'The first and third are Poles and have always sought the destruction of the Russian motherland; the second has had a brief and indecent relationship with Major Rosenmeister.'⁶⁸ The *meshchanin* Vorob'ev was accused of perching on the phaeton of the nobleman Bolotnikov, as he arrived in town, unaware of the riot, and transported him to the square, shouting, 'Here is a true Pole, a poisoner!': Bolotnikov was put under lock and key with officers and officials.⁶⁹

As we can see, in this purported conspiracy to poison the people, the rioters blamed the police and military authorities, and also civilian specialists from among privileged, 'educated' social groups. Together with doctor Bogorodskii, the land surveyor Kashubskii was put on trial, merchant K. Glushitskii alleging that, being in his house, Kashubskii poured poison into the dough;⁷⁰ merchant's son Nikolai Latin, on the night of 12 July, had pointed the rioters to Kashubskii's apartment.⁷¹ And in the second riot, on 23 July, angry townspeople hunted down two auditors and a food inspector, among them the merchant Petr Khakhin, probably settling

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, l. 7 ob.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, ll. 4–4 ob.

⁶⁶ Evstaf'ev, *Vosstanie voennykh posel'ian*, p. 116.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 114–16.

⁶⁸ RGVIA, f. 405, op. 1, no. 5572, l. 8, admission of guilt taken by the rioters from Captain Shakhovskoi, 12 July 1831.

⁶⁹ See the accusation and testimonies of U. Vorob'ev, October 1831, at RGVIA, f. 405, op. 1, d. 5575, ll. 10–14 ob. In another example of hatred towards Poles, following the admission of guilt by Capt. Shakhovski, the Polish-named Captain Khobot was also treated by commoners as a poisoner and accused of having 'an indecent relationship' with his major. RGVIA, f. 405, no. 5572, l. 8.

⁷⁰ RGVIA, f. 405, op. 1, d. 5575, l. 14, accusation and testimonies of the merchant Kirilo Glushitskii, 25 November 1831.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, l. 11, verdict on the merchant's son Nikolai Latin (no. 22), 25 November 1831.

scores with the food inspector Polianskii.⁷² And three women, *meshchanki*, hounded across allotments ‘a large hunchbacked man in a tailcoat’, the architect Shattin, calling out to the rioting soldiers, ‘Here! There’s an architect pouring poison on our cabbages!’⁷³ A special distrust of doctors is understandable in the context: Bogorodskii was severely beaten, Wagner killed, and the doctor in the hospital narrowly escaped arrest.⁷⁴ Evidently, the townspeople were deeply dissatisfied with their superiors right across the board, the rioters calling the whole body of them ‘cholera’⁷⁵ — to be killed.

The attitude of the townspeople towards the authorities after the Napoleonic wars

In addition to the triggers of the riot and common causes of discontent, study of the riot and trial allows us to examine the views of the people about the authorities, to consider changing attitudes in the 1810s and 1820s and the reasons for these changes. Matters become clearer if we analyse a number of the more informative cases within a wider context. Certain individual cases are particularly suggestive, helping us to see the underlying attitudes of people — namely, those relating to several men who spoke of secret decrees allegedly commanding the common people to kill their superiors. Two *meshchane* from Staraiia Russa, Aleksandr Teslov and Vasil Khlebnikov, were accused of inciting people to riot on 11–12 July by producing and reading out in public papers from a higher authority, said to have been received in Novgorod, ordering the people to rise up against their superiors. Teslov ‘beat his chest, shouting “I am the first instigator!”’ (Later he said he was drunk and did not remember anything — a common answer to any charge.) Teslov and Khlebnikov were apprehended as they travelled across the villages of the military colonies after the riot, showing the colonists these secret decrees. Detained by officers of the military colonies, they were interrogated harshly and handed over to the Commission. Their ‘secret papers’ were not found. Both men had other charges against them — threatening policemen in Staraiia Russa, assisting soldiers to ‘punish’ the officers — but spreading false papers was the most

⁷² Ibid., l. 5 ob., verdict on the merchant’s son Petr Vasil’ev Khakhin (no. 8), 25 November 1831.

⁷³ Ibid., ll. 5 ob., 132–32 ob., verdicts of the *meshchanskaa* widow Ul’iana Demidova (no. 119) and *meshchanskie devitsy* (maidens) Katerina Dem’ianova (no. 120) and Ul’iana Churkina (no. 121), 25 November 1831.

⁷⁴ See the report of the hospital authorities at RGVIA, f. 405, op. 1, no. 5581 (Other documents of the Commission), ll. 1–3.

⁷⁵ Ibid., l. 6.

serious charge. Teslov and Khlebnikov were sentenced to third and second category penalties.⁷⁶

A couple of other cases, mentioning similar acts of incitement of people in the villages of Lake Il'men's military colonies, were also reported. Not surprisingly, Nicholas I ordered a search for the instigators, who it was thought could have come to Staraia Russa and the surrounding villages from St Petersburg.⁷⁷ Several men of the town testified that among the rioters an active part was played by a certain 'riotous young *meshchanin* who said that he had come from St Petersburg, where he had taken part in the riot' of 22 July.⁷⁸ This *meshchanin* allegedly questioned the officers and beat them severely; but those, who, according to the Commission, must have known the young man, did not reveal his name (it was perhaps Mikhail Smirnov, a fire inspector attached to the St Petersburg police).⁷⁹

These episodes may seem characteristic of the traditional popular revolt, but over the course of the 1820s, the authorities of several provinces reported cases of the dissemination of secret decrees (for example, the decree of Alexander I to give freedom to the people, including the liberation of serfs) or 'secret songs' among the people, both in villages and in towns.⁸⁰

Certainly, the riots in Staraia Russa, one of the centres of the military colonies, represent a specific case: as the previous section showed, people there were especially burdened by the administration of the military and police, and by numerous civic duties. But it is possible to argue that the nature of dissatisfaction in Staraia Russa in general correlated with popular ideas among the people in this period: townspeople and soldiers believed that the officers and their superiors — but not the ultimate authority, the tsar — were evilly disposed towards the people. Merchants and *meshchane*, as can be seen from their testimonies, blamed local authorities — 'poisoners' from among officers and policemen, doctors, 'Germans and "Poles"' — but not the central government, not the tsar. Indeed, it is known that deputations of military colonists planned to petition Nicholas I during the riot.⁸¹

⁷⁶ RGVIA, f. 405, op. 1, d. 5575, ll. 2–20b., accusation and testimonies of A. Teslov and V. Khlebnikov, October–November 1831.

⁷⁷ Evstaf'ev, *Vosstanie*, p. 129.

⁷⁸ RGVIA, f. 405, op. 1, d. 5575, ll. 3–16ob.

⁷⁹ RGVIA, f. 405, op. 2, no. 5415, military court case of the St Petersburg Ordinance House and correspondence about the fire squad inspector of the St Petersburg police Mikhail Smirnov, who participated in the riot of military colonies of Novgorod province.

⁸⁰ Militsa Nechkina, *Dekabristy*, Moscow, 1982, pp. 142–47.

⁸¹ Evstaf'ev, *Vosstanie voennykh poselians*, pp. 155–61.

Evidently, many of the actions, speeches and motivations of the rioters, revealed during the investigation, were also occasioned by the dramatic circumstances of the cholera pandemic. But it can be assumed that there was a marked distrust, and ensuing discontent, among merchants, *meshchane* and magistrates of the provincial towns of the Northwest with regard to the local authorities: the military, police and civil administrators — tensions frequently occasioned by billeting disputes, conscription and day-to-day problems. This dissatisfaction of commoners with their superiors, and the policy of the state in general, had, it seems, increased in the 1820s. During this period a growing demand emerged for the equalization of duties and taxation among townspeople and their magistrates. For example, in 1823–24 there was a protracted dispute between the council and people of Novaia Ladoga and the town's chief of police. The council asked the governor to extend billeting duty (or paying billeting money) to the nobles and *raznochintsy*. At the same time they suggested that the governor introduce a single, equal land tax for all property-owners, to replace the system of fundraising for urban police, fire safety and military expenses, which was only paid by merchants and *meshchane* (they cited the example of the town of Schlissel'burg, where the council had successfully introduced such a land tax). Initially, the governor supported the council of Novaia Ladoga, approving the extension of billeting to all homeowners; but in 1824, as a result of protests from the town's chief of police and nobles, the governor rejected both of the council's pleas.⁸²

It can also be argued, with some reservations, that this growing dissatisfaction with the police, army and the authorities — and feelings of more general resentment among commoners in towns and villages at the policy of the central authority — manifested itself in the first couple of decades after the end of the war in 1814, because of expectations among the common people that they would be rewarded for their service and their losses during the war years. An interesting case took place in Staraiia Russa. A certain *meshchanin* Ivan Lapin, arrested there as one of the main rioters (he had allegedly beaten the police bailiff, and provided fetters for officers), held the medal of the Order of St George, the Russian highest military award. When an investigation was made into how he had acquired it, as he had never served in the army, it was discovered that Lapin received the order — which was fairly unusual — for his deeds in the militia in 1812, being personally awarded it by the commander. The court decided to

⁸² See Mikhail A. Belan, 'The Impact of Military Duties in the Early 19th Century on Urban Commoners in Russia: Recruit and Militia Levies and Billeting in the Communes of St. Petersburg Province', unpublished DPhil thesis, Oxford University, 2023, pp. 223–25.

sentence Lapin to the army, stripping him of his insignia; as a holder of the St George medal, however, he was excused corporal punishment.⁸³ It has been noted that in the revolutions of the 1820s–30s, and not only among the membership of secret societies in towns, there were, in many European countries a lot of veterans — former soldiers and sergeants — who had served with distinction in the Napoleonic campaigns and now played an active role in popular movements. Whether there was a direct correlation in Russia also, between commoners — men who returned from military service under Alexander I, or from short-term militia service — and those who took part in various protests, including popular disturbances such as the cholera riots, is a question which needs further investigation. But we can assume that there was a growing self-awareness among urban commoners in the 1810s–20s, and a growing understanding of their role and position in the state. Much of that was owed to their massive involvement in the campaigns of the 1800s–10s. As Dominic Lieven puts it: ‘The greatest contribution of the “masses” to the Russian war effort was their service in the armed forces and the militia’;⁸⁴ and Alexander Martin has argued that the wars with Napoleon, and the 1812 invasion in particular, produced a great impact on the urban groups: this epoch ‘forms an important moment in the unfolding of the civilizing process’ in Russian towns.⁸⁵

This hypothesis, suggesting a growing awareness and, probably, growing popular dissatisfaction at the policy of the central authorities in the post-war decades, has yet to be researched in detail. There are, however, some suggestive instances. For example, in her work on the Decembrist revolt, Militsa Nechkina argues that insufficient attention has been paid to the role of the people of St Petersburg in the tragic events of 14 December 1825. It is evident that there was a fair degree of support for the revolt demonstrated by the crowd (*chern’*) on Senate Square on the day of the riot.⁸⁶ Some people were reported as throwing logs at officers of Nicholas I’s entourage. (Prince Eugen of Wurttemberg pointed to the workers employed in construction of St Isaac’s Cathedral.)⁸⁷ The most

⁸³ RGVA, f. 405, op. 1, d. 5575, ll. 1 ob.–2.

⁸⁴ Dominic Lieven, *Russia against Napoleon: The Battle for Europe, 1807 to 1814*, London, 2009, p. 252.

⁸⁵ Alexander Martin, ‘The 1812 War and the Civilizing Process in Russia’, in Janet M. Hartley, Paul Keenan and Dominic Lieven (eds), *Russia and the Napoleonic Wars (War, Culture and Society, 1750–1850)*, London, 2015, pp. 237–39.

⁸⁶ Militsa Nechkina, *Den’ 14 Dekabria*, Moscow, 1975, pp. 195–209.

⁸⁷ ‘Iz vospominanii printsa Evgeniia Viurtembergskogo. Poezdka v Sankt-Peterburg v 1825 g.’, *Russkii Arkhiv*, 1–4, 1878, pp. 330–35. One man told the prince that ‘the people were just playing’. See Nechkina, *Den’ 14 Dekabria*, pp. 209–10.

notable episode was the aggressive behaviour demonstrated by the crowd on the square towards the clergy — the metropolitan and his companions, who arrived in an attempt to talk to the rioters. Likewise, on the night following the revolt, a couple of officers found shelter in a house where their host, most probably a merchant, showed some sympathy for their cause, and a decent understanding of the situation in the country, he too complaining about the policy of the authorities.⁸⁸ The popular ideas of this period were even reflected in oral culture: a popular ‘song about the Decembrists’ began to circulate after 1825 about the alleged intention of the central authority to give freedom to the people — an intention which had been thwarted by their superiors. The song circulated widely among the people, with its variations recorded from the North to the Volga region, and as late as the 1930s.⁸⁹

Conclusion

According to contemporary accounts, the riots in Staraiia Russa in the summer of 1831 were occasioned by the unpopular anti-cholera measures of the military authorities of the town. But the hitherto unexplored files of the military investigation Commission — containing charges, replies, testimonies of victims and witnesses — show that, though these measures may have served as a trigger, widespread dissatisfaction had grown among merchants and *meshchane* at the attitude of the police and officials towards billeting and other civic duties. In the upshot, the rioters called for policemen to be killed, with clerics, doctors and men with German and Polish names also falling victim to their rage.

As the riot began at night, the elites — the merchant body — were unable to organize. The magistrates themselves hid or fled. On 12 July, however, some of the magistrates, together with rioting worker soldiers, took control, restored order and even ‘tried’ officials and officers captured at night and accused of poisoning the people.

As a result, the Commission found most of the merchants guilty, only releasing three who had saved officers; the other forty-two were sentenced to first category punishment (the first to third categories incurred a sentence of corporal punishment and twenty years of service, the fourth only service in the army). For merchants, there were no gradations of punishment: mere presence on the square or in the streets was punished as hard as the actions of the main rioters. Evidently, the Commission perceived merchants, the

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 323–24.

⁸⁹ Nechkina, *Dekabristy*, pp. 146–47.

urban elite, as responsible for the good standing of the town. For similar actions, such as countersigning the officials' confessions, *meshchane* were only sentenced to fourth category penalties: out of ninety-one arrested, seventy-three were convicted and sixty-one sentenced to fourth-category punishment. In the years 1841–42 it has also been established that at least ten men from among those punished, including two former merchants, were transferred, at the request of their families, to local watch units, to see out their service.

The events of 1831, it has been suggested, may speak for a possible growth of self-awareness in towns, with increased demands and a growing scepticism towards the authorities among merchants, *meshchane* and council magistrates. By the 1820s, it seems, the townspeople had developed certain expectations — possibly correlated with the growth of their involvement in state business, notably with the contributions they made and the losses they suffered during the politically and economically challenging period of the wars between 1806 and 1814. This hypothesis has been set in the context of: 1) the growing demand for equalization of duties, as town councils in the 1820s, for example at Shlissel'burg and Novaia Ladoga, petitioned governors to apply billeting duty to all homeowners including nobles, or to introduce an equal land tax; 2) the false decrees reported in Staraiia Russa urging rebellion against the elite ('cholera'), may seem characteristic of a traditional popular revolt, but similar decrees and secret songs had been widely reported by the authorities of other regions in this period; 3) other open expressions of doubt or distrust towards authorities in towns during these years, with the actions of the St Petersburg people on 14 December 1825 being the salient example.