

Abstract

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Veche and republican Novgorod have been important symbols in Russian political history for over 200 years. Russian intellectuals in the nineteenth and early twentieth century often idealised Novgorod and its so-called *veche* order, using it as a symbol of the freedom of the people and the struggle against tyranny.

It is commonly believed that an institution with the name *veche* was part of the governmental structures of Rus, and later of city republics such as Novgorod and Pskov. In the secondary literature it has often been presented as the centre around which political life revolved and as the constitutional institution that governed and controlled these city-states. The Novgorodian *veche* has had great symbolic value in Russian politics and is still occasionally referred to as the democratic roots of Russia. It is considered, among other things, to have been the authority in charge of the election, supervision and dismissal of princes as well as other high officials of the city – the bishop, the *posadnik* and the *tysiatskii*. Other areas considered to have been under the jurisdiction of *veche* are decisions on war and peace, trade agreements, the granting of land and privileges and legislation.

The use of “indirect references” has been very important in constructing the picture of *veche* as a constitutional institution. Activities considered as having been within the jurisdiction of *veche* have commonly been regarded as initiated by *veche* even if this is not mentioned in the sources. No studies proving, or even showing it to be likely, that these “indirect references” actually refer to *veche* are to be found.

This study examines only direct occurrences of *veche* in the sources during the period 997–1518. The decision not to include the indirect mentions is based on a wish to try to avoid the bias to which they might give rise. All occurrences of *veche* in the sources of this study are analysed. The events and processes of which *veche* is part are also scrutinised in order to facilitate the understanding of *veche*'s meaning in each specific case.

Veche seems to have functioned as a catalyst for the will of the people. It had political influence, but the indications are that this influence was informal and of an unpredictable nature. It seems that *veche* commonly indicated the community as a whole, or large parts of it. The influence of *veche* was not based on its being a political institution and therefore holding specific powers, but rather – at least in the cases discussed in this study – on its “physical” strength. It was the potential for violence of those present at *veche* that gave the group its influence. The inherent power in the gatherings referred to as *veche* was something that those in power respected, or even feared, even though *veche* had no formal power.

Key words: Novgorod, Pskov, Rus, political history, chronicles, Middle Ages, peoples assembly, *veche*, city-republic, prince, *posadnik*, *tysiatskii*, bishop, community, revolt, institution, political power.