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WOMEN AND PROPERTY IN MEDIEVAL NOVGOROD: DEPENDENCE AND INDEPENDENCE*

The topic of women in medieval Novgorod is likely to elicit, from scholars if not from laymen, two distinct and contradictory images. One is the posadnitsa Marfa Boretskaia, draped in the romantic garb of a more colorful tradition of historical writing, as the defender of the Novgorodian republic in its last years against the onslaught of the oppressive Muscovite autocracy. The second image, common to all of medieval Russia, and based on the much-published writings of Daniil Zatochnik, Herberstein and his fellow travelers, misreadings of Domostroi, and folklore, is of women confined to the terem in an attempt to limit the evil they could inflict on male society. Preliminary research indicates that for aristocratic women in the Novgorodian republic, neither image bears much resemblance to reality. Although the structure of Novgorodian society placed limitations on independent action for women even more than for men, the role women were accorded in the activities of society contradicts the notion that women were restricted to a life of total dependence.

Recent years have seen the first serious work on the social structure of Novgorod. Diverse Novgorodian sources, including archeological finds, birch-bark documents, akty, chronicles, law codes, byliny, and a wide variety of ecclesiastical documents, ultimately yield much information, but do not speak directly to the question of social structure, and no comprehensive study has been done. The chimera of Novgorod as Russia’s heritage of democracy

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1. It would be excessive to attempt to list here a complete bibliography on medieval Novgorod. The best brief history, by G. E. Kochin, is found in his volume of documents Pamiatniki Velikogo Novgoroda i Pskova (Leningrad: Leningradskii universitet, Istoricheskii fakul'tet, 1935). For economic history, see A. L. Shapiro, et al., Agrarnata istorii severo-zapada Rossii (vtoria polovina XV-nachalo XVI v.), Vol. I (Leningrad: Nauka, 1971); L. V. Danilova, Ocherki po istorii zemlevladeniia i khoziaistva v novgorodskoi zemle v XIV-XV vv. (Moscow: AN SSSR, 1955); V. N. Bernadskii, Novgorod i novgorodskaiia zemlia v XV veke (Leningrad: AN SSSR, 1961). N. L. Podvigina does look briefly at the social structure in her Ocherki sotsial'no-ekonomicheskoi i politicheskoi istorii Novgoroda velikogo v XII-XIII vv. (Moscow: Vysshia shkola, 1976), but for the earlier
and liberty has been replaced by a more reasoned depiction of the city's political history as a semi-autonomous city-state controlling a widespread commercial empire, and economic history of international trade. The outlines of the social structure also have emerged; the wealth and power of the Novgorodian republic was solidly in the hands of a hereditary landholding aristocracy which guided Novgorod's government and foreign trade.

By comparison, greater attention has been shown to the question of the status of women in medieval Russia. A surprising number of studies have appeared, including a dozen or so before 1930. Most rely for their information on some combination of chronicles, law codes, and folklore, while a few add selected ecclesiastical writings and badly misused linguistics. Thus all discussion revolves around the perception of women—their status in law, and their image in didactic texts written by men—but not their condition in fact. Even the recent dissertation by Susanne McNally falls prey to this confusion of perceived role and reality. Although she consulted a variety of sources, none were fully utilized, and her study slights the pre-Muscovite period.

Examinations of specific topics relating to the status of women have been more successful than general surveys. Shchapov, Eck, and Roman selected topics on legal status of women.

period of the Novgorodian state only. The most innovative—and most prolific—scholar of Novgorod is V. L. Iainin; see especially his Novgorod'ske posadniki (Moscow: Moskovskii universitet, 1962) and Ocherki komplexnogo istoricheskogo izucheniiia: Srednevekovyi Novgorod (Moscow: Vysshaia shkola, 1977). L. N. Langer reviewed his contribution in "V. L. Iainin and the History of Novgorod," Slavic Review, 33, No. 1 (March 1974), 114-19.


4. Ia. N. Shchapov, "Brak i sem'ia v drevnei Rusi," Voprosy istorii, No. 10 (1970), 216-19; Alexandre Eck, "La Situation juridique de la femme russe au moyen âge," and