THE IAROSLAVICHI AND THE NOVGORODIAN VECHE 1230-1272: A CASE STUDY ON PRINCELY RELATIONS WITH THE VECHE

Introduction

In the winter of 1253, Prince Iaroslav Iaroslavich (1230-1272), the younger brother of Grand Prince Aleksandr Iaroslavich “Nevskii” (1220-1263), fled from the Low Country (Suzdalia) and came to Pskov, where they made him prince.1 Four years earlier, Iaroslav’s older brother, Andrei, had usurped the throne of Vladimir and both he and Iaroslav led an uprising against the Tatars in 1252, but the two princes were finally defeated in battle at Pereiaslavl Zalesskii by a Tatar army under Neveyuy in May or July of that year. Following the battle, Andrei fled to Pskov and then on to Sweden, but Iaroslav apparently returned home to Tver’, and only fled to Ladoga and then to Pskov after his wife and one of his voevoda’s were killed by the Tatars in 1253.²

The Novgorodians took notice of Iaroslav during his reign as prince of Pskov, and in 1255 brought him out of Pskov to become Prince of Novgorod.³ The trouble was that Novgorod already had a prince: Vasilii Aleksandrovich (d. 1271), Iaroslav’s nephew,⁴ and Vasilii’s father, Grand Prince Aleksandr, who had placed Vasilii on the throne in Novgorod in 1253, was willing to fight to keep his son there. In fact, Aleksandr led an army against Novgorod, and his brother fled the city in the face of this opposition.⁵ In spite of this setback, Iaroslav went on to become Grand Prince of Vladimir on his brother’s death in 1263, and served as Prince of Novgorod between 1264 and

3. NPL, 80, 307.
4. Fennell notes that Aleksandr Iaroslavich was married in 1239, so that Vasilii could have been at most only twelve years old. Fennell, Crisis, 111.
5. NPL, 80, 307.
1267, and again between 1269 and his death in 1272. His reign in Novgorod was at times a turbulent one, and he was briefly driven out by a veche in 1270, although he showed himself a political survivor then too, and managed to take back the throne and hold it until his death.

The Iaroslavichi, Grand Prince Iaroslav Vsevolodich (1191-1246; Grand Prince 1242-46) and his sons and grandsons — particularly his son Iaroslav’s almost two-decade career in Northwestern Rus’ and his relatively brief reigns as Prince of Novgorod — provide an interesting case study in the relationship of the prince and the veche. The traditional historiography on the veche has often argued that this relationship was one of almost perpetual conflict between an autocratic prince and a more pluralistic (democratic or at least oligarchic) veche. But the reign of Iaroslav Iaroslavich in Novgorod, and his interaction with the veche, demonstrate that this is an oversimplified view of the veche and its relationship to the prince, particularly in Novgorod. I hope to show through this case study that there are significant shortcomings in the view of the veche found in the historiography, particularly in the relationship of the prince to the veche, and by showing this, I hope to reopen the debate on the nature of the veche and its place in Russian history.

The veche and the prince in the historiography

The traditional historiography on the veche has tended to be polarized. Imperial era historians thus set the autocratic or authoritarian prince in opposition to the democratic veche, arguing that the veche grew up where princely power was weakest. Thus, Sergei M. Soloviev argued that during the Kievan period, princely power dominated southern Rus’, but was largely absent from the northwest. As the princes of Kiev declined, the princes of Suzdal grew in power and eclipsed Kiev in the twelfth century, especially with the reign of Andrei Bogoliubskii. Hence, only a few vecha were held in the northeast before princely power overwhelmed it. But the northwest did not see the growth in princely power, thus the veche had fertile ground in which to grow. Many historians followed this line of thinking, tending to see the veche as a democratic institution in opposition to princely autocracy. The veche in Novgorod was the quintessential example of the democratic veche managing to shake off princely autocracy and establish democracy in the city-state. Indeed, Novgorod did manage around the turn of the twelfth century to begin to elect and dismiss the city’s secular and ecclesiastical officials, including the prince.

In this regard, Vasilii Kliuchevskii’s enumeration of the powers of the veche in his History of Russia is typical of the traditional historiography. He