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Yo-Ho-Ho, and a Bottle of Vodka: The Governance of the Russian Ushkuiniki Pirates

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Abstract
This paper examines the governance of the Russian ushkuiniki pirates in the medieval period. The ushkuiniki had to secure cooperation on their vessels privately. I hypothesize that the ushkuiniki captains screened their applicants via ritual combat and blood oaths. The ritual combat filtered out noncooperators by imposing costs upon them before a voyage, and the blood oath destined oath breakers to face capital punishment. The application process ensured that only loyal pirates would board the the ship and allowed cooperation to be self-enforcing. The effectiveness of the ushkuiniki is evidenced by their large fleets and extensive plunder.

JEL Codes: K42, N83, P49
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I. Introduction

In the past two decades, economic theory has enjoyed a surge of research on criminal organizations and their governance (Skaperdas 2001; Varese 2001; Sobel and Osoba 2009; Leeson and Rogers 2012; Skarbek 2014). Such research has paid special attention to pirates. While economic analysis of these criminals has existed for some time (Storr 2004), research on pirates yielded its greatest results through the efforts of Peter Leeson (2007; 2009; 2010). Leeson argues that contrary to the typical image of golden age pirates as rowdy and disorganized, the sea bandits were governed by a strict system of rules. Pirates sought to maximize the gains from their criminal activities yet could not rely on state systems of law and dispute resolution. They had to invent their own private law codes and underpin them with a democratic system of checks and balances, or "piratical democracy" (Leeson 2007). This system allowed the pirates to minimize the negative externalities from conflict on their ships and keep captain predation under control. Leeson (2007, pp. 1077–1079) concludes that

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pirates constituted successful criminal organizations, as evidenced by the volume of their plunder.

Yet almost no attention has been devoted to examining piratical organizations in Russian history. The existing research (Rollins 1994; Leikin 2017) is confined to the study of Russian privateers—the state-sanctioned raiders of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. However, a much older piratical tradition existed in Russia, namely that of the ushkuiniki. These pirates originated in Novgorod and roamed Russian waters from the eleventh to the fifteenth century (Gibson 1970, pp. 60–61; Bernadskiy 1961, pp. 41–47). They plundered vast riches from merchants, laid siege to cities, and were often employed by the Russian nobility to protect their merchant fleets. The ushkuiniki even established their own version of Tortuga—a haven city called Vyatka (Soloviev 1896, p. 1380).[1]

Such criminal success could only be ensured through extensive cooperation, which had to be secured privately. As the ushkuiniki frequently operated in the waters outside Novgorodian jurisdiction, they could not rely on the city-state's governance mechanisms (Gumelev and Parkhomenko 2013). Even when the ushkuiniki were on land, Novgorodian legal institutions usually did not acknowledge them, as doing so would have made the republic complicit in the deeds of the pirates and provided its rivals with ample casus belli.

The main objective of my paper is to uncover the mechanisms that secured cooperation on the ushkuiniki ships and made their success possible. I argue that the ushkuiniki resorted to distinctive mechanisms of private governance such as ritual combat and blood oaths. An economic analysis of these mechanisms constitutes the key novel element of this paper, as they differed significantly from the law codes and democratic checks and balances employed by Western pirates in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

A ship's captain, called a vataman, secured cooperation on his vessel by filtering out potential opportunists in the process of recruiting pirates. Before joining the ushkuiniki crew, an aspiring recruit had to successfully defend against the vataman's onslaught using a wooden mace or a sword. The ritual combat thus screened out potential pirates that were quick to fight, as the applicants would be hit and could not fight back. In doing so, it also allowed the vataman to screen for a particular type of patience, important for maintaining order on their ship.

[1] Today the city is called Kirov.

Then, before joining, the potential recruit had to give a blood oath to behave cooperatively, the breaking of which would be punished with death (Kostomarov 1994). Thus, the vataman required two signals from the applicants: an agreement to ritual combat and an agreement to take a blood oath. Since noncooperative individuals have high time preference, the prospect of damage sustained in ritual combat and the threat of the death penalty for oath breaking imposed significant expected costs and prevented them from applying to join the pirate crew. The screening mechanisms thus ensured that trustworthy individuals would engage in ritual combat and take a blood oath, while nontrustworthy individuals would not. Such a system thus allowed the vatamans to recruit loyal and patient pirates, which enabled automatic enforcement of cooperative behavior.

To provide empirical backing to my hypotheses, I rely on a large number of historical sources, from academic works (Telitsyn 2013, 2020; Emmausskiy 2000; Emmausskiy and Kirukhina 1972; Kostomarov 1994; Bernadskiy 1961; Soloviev 1896; Gumelev 2013; Gumelev and Parkhomenko 2013; Samokvasov 1908; Rozhdestvenskiy 1929; Marasanova 2007) to preserved birch-bark manuscripts (Nasonov 1955, 2000; Yanin et al. 2004; Mitchell and Forbes 1914) to interpretations of sagas and folklore songs about the ushkuiniki (Kostomarov 1994; Bailey and Ivanova 1997).

The paper adheres to the following structure. Section 2 provides historical background on the ushkuiniki and delineates the governance problem on their vessels. The third section analyzes the ritual-combat and blood-oath screening mechanisms. The fourth section provides empirical evidence of the success of the Russian pirates. The fifth section concludes by offering potential avenues for future studies of the ushkuiniki.

II. A Brief History of the Ushkuiniki

The phenomenon of the ushkuiniki originated in Novgorod (Gibson 1970, pp. 60–61). The emergence of Russian pirates in that city was not accidental, as Novgorod was one of the freest Russian cities during the time when Russia was called Garadarika, or the Land of Cities. The city was highly decentralized in its governance, and critical decisions were made at a democratic council called the veche. The veche made decisions on multiple levels, from individual streets to city districts to the entire city (Telitsyn 2013, pp. 34–35). As time went by, the veche largely fell under the control of the oligarchic

boyars.[2] This created dissatisfaction among the city residents, and some of them wanted to break free from serving the interests of the wealthiest elite (Samokvasov 1908, p. 65). These individuals wanted to be as free as possible[3] and formed their own bands of pirates to venture beyond the confines of Novgorod. Some of them later separated from Novgorod completely by capturing the city of Vyatka and establishing an independent pirate hub in the region (Emmausskiy and Kirukhina 1972).

While the phenomenon of the ushkuiniki originated in Novgorod, the crews themselves were quite diverse geographically. They frequently hailed from Ustug, Vologda, Karelia, Smolensk, Tver, and Moscow (Telitsyn 2020, pp. 26–27). The pirate crews consisted of various social classes as well. Some of the ushkuiniki were as noble as boyars, but some were regular citizens or peasants.

At the head of each vessel was a vataman (Telitsyn 2013, pp. 194–95). The hierarchy of the ushkuiniki was much less sophisticated than that of their Western counterparts. The tasks of commanding, recruiting, and distributing loot all fell to the vataman. Historical sources make no mention of quartermasters, lieutenants, or other personnel to whom the vataman could delegate some of his duties.

The ushkuiniki did not discriminate in their criminal activities. They robbed Russian merchant vessels along with foreign ones and frequently sieged cities. The ushkuiniki were particularly drawn to the Volga River because of the abundance of trade carried over it in the Russian Middle Ages (Rozhdestvenskiy 1929, p. 64). Their plunder was not limited to rivers, as the ushkuiniki frequently sailed the Baltic Sea and raided Swedish and Finnish lands. However, their activities went beyond robbery. The ushkuiniki also served as mercenaries, were frequently employed by warring Russian princes as maritime scouts, and offered their protection services to merchants (Gumelev 2013).

Archaeological findings show that the ushkuiniki were well equipped by the standards of their time: clad in chainmail and helmets and wielding well-crafted swords, axes, spears, and ranged weapons such as crossbows. Thus, they had high chances of surviving confrontations with their enemies. Naturally, the Russian pirates were not immune to strategic errors and sometimes lost large-scale battles, such as the one in 1409, in which a fleet of ushkuiniki divided its forces over two rivers and subsequently lost when the Tatars defeated their

[2] Boyars were the representatives of Russian nobility in pre-imperial times.

[3] Sometimes the ushkuiniki were called *povolniki*, which roughly translates as "individuals longing to be free."

split fleet (Telitsyn 2020, p. 181). However, for the most part, because of their swiftness and hit-and-run tactics, the Russian pirates emerged as victors.

The largest fleets of the ushkuiniki amounted to ninety ships and approximately three thousand pirates (see, for instance, Soloviev 1896; Kostomarov 1994). These numbers are comparable to the Caribbean pirate fleets in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. For instance, the infamous Captain Morgan commanded a fleet of two thousand pirates and thirty-seven ships, and Bartholomew Roberts commanded a fleet of five hundred men and four ships (Leeson 2007, p. 1055).

The ushkuiniki's raids continued up to the fifteenth century. Their numbers were continuously bolstered by recruits coming from Novgorod and other lands. In the end, only an army led by the consolidated Muscovy princedom was able to conquer Novgorod and Vyatka, thus putting an end to the ushkuiniki phenomenon, which had endured for at least four centuries (Emmausskiy 2000; Telitsyn 2020, p. 191).

III. Securing Cooperation on the Ushkuiniki Vessels

The ushkuiniki would not have survived for so long if they had not been able to secure cooperation on their vessels. The challenges to vessel governance were significant. It was imperative to keep out pirates who would fight with other members of the crew. The ushkuiniki, armed with sabers, axes, and spears, were crammed into ships that fit about thirty pirates. Since they were in such close quarters, a violent conflict between two of them would impose extensive externalities on third parties, as other ushkuiniki could get wounded or the entire boat could sink. A sinking would lead to immense loss of life and capital for the entire crew in the form of their vessel and all their loot. Moreover, the captain had to prevent opportunists from boarding the ship, as they could steal the crew's loot, rendering the piratical ventures unprofitable.

The task of recruiting and keeping the crew in check fell upon the vataman. But how could he ensure that his recruits would not resort to conflict or attempt to steal from the crew? This problem was compounded by the farflung origins of recruits, who came from every corner of Slavic lands to join the crews (Telitsyn 2013, p. 27). Finding out in advance whether these individuals were opportunists was costly, if not impossible. Thus, the vataman, acting with incomplete information, required an effective screening process to separate

noncooperative individuals from loyal ones and induce the latter, not the former, to join his crew.

Specifically, the vataman engaged the recruit in ritual combat in which the recruit would only defend against the vataman's blows. This practice served a dual purpose. First, even though the fight was not to the death, the recruit's chances of suffering a heavy hit and physical injuries were very real. The threat of physical damage received prior to a voyage deterred some opportunistic applicants with high time preference from joining the crew. Second, as the ritual demanded that the recruit only defend and not fight back, the vataman could also screen out impatient, aggressive individuals who broke this rule.

An account of ushkuiniki ritual combat is contained in a folk song about the Russian version of Captain Jack Sparrow—Vasily Buslayev—that commemorates his life from the early days of his piracy until his death. Researchers often advise treating sagas and folk songs with caution when using them to interpret historical events. However, Soloviev (1896, pp. 763–64), Azbelev (1982, pp. 216–18), and Kostomarov (1994, p. 341) contend that the folk songs about Buslayev come close to depicting the reality of Russian life in that period. Birch-bark manuscripts of 1171 even record the official death of Buslayev (Yanin 2017, pp. 147–48).[4]

The song starts with Buslayev as an aspiring vataman gathering a crew. Instantly, he recognizes the economic problem before him: he requires crewmates that cooperate with him and do not act opportunistically. Buslayev first issues a call for applicants, notifying the residents of various streets and houses of Novgorod about his desire to form an ushkuiniki crew. In the yard of his estate, he puts a large cauldron filled to the brim with wine (Bailey and Ivanova 1998, p. 311). After an applicant has a drink, Buslayev strikes him with a wooden sword or a club (Bailey and Ivanova 1998, p. 312):

Soon someone came, a new one came
To Vasily in his wide courtyard.
Kostya Novotorzhanin approached
The goblet of green wine,
And he took the goblet with one hand,
He drank the goblet in one draught.
Vasily rushed from the new vestibule,
Vasily grabbed his scarlet club.

[4] This may be an example of a myth seeping into reality, showing just how closely the songs depicted the reality of life in Novgorod and of the ushkuiniki in particular.

He struck Kostya on the back,
Kostya stood without flinching,
The curls on his reckless head hadn't budged.
"Hail to you, Kostya Novotorzhanin!
Be my brave friend,
Enter my white-stone palace."

Notice that the applicant (Kostya) endured the blows of the vataman without fighting back. Thus, the ritual combat of the ushkuiniki went beyond the mere screening of good applicants from bad by more specifically testing individuals' response to stress and physical pain. This allowed the vataman to gauge whether the applicant would become aggressive when explicitly instructed not to. If the applicant fought back against the vataman's onslaught, the latter could swiftly reject the applicant. In the case of Buslayev, the screening method allowed him to recruit exactly thirty people (Bailey and Ivanova 1998, p. 323), matching the carrying capacity of the typical ushkui vessel.

The ritual combat filtered out some noncooperators. But what about the opportunists who were skilled in combat or through sheer luck weathered the vataman's blows? To prevent the admission of such cadres, the vataman issued a credible threat of punishment for noncooperative behavior even after a recruit successfully passed the test of ritual combat. The threat came from the institution of blood oaths.[5] Blood oaths had been in use in ancient Greece, in Hungary, and in Scandinavia (Kostomarov 1994, p. 339). They were also widespread in Novgorod,[6] where they presented an interesting blend of pagan traditions with Orthodox Christianity. When giving blood oaths, the ushkuiniki swore to always help each other when in need, sacrifice their lives for one another, and take vengeance for another's death. Breaking such an oath brought a punishment that could only be paid by taking another's life.

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[5] Oaths on the Bible were also prevalent in the culture of the Caribbean pirates; however, their role was largely secondary in their governance.

[6] Blood oaths in Novgorod were often made when forming bratchinas—brotherhoods, unions for life. The bratchina enjoyed extensive reputation among Novgorod's people and was treated as a corporation that had the right of self-governance. Formal governance institutions of Novgorod would not usually intervene in the dealings of the bratchina (Kostomarov 1994, p. 359). Bratchinas were often formed by residents of various Novgorod streets for securing their local governance or managing feasts in the city but were also used to form warrior bands and criminal organizations such as piratical crews.

The blood oaths thus included an individual promise to abstain from certain behaviors. The blood oath made such a declaration public, creating common knowledge and expectations about how pirates were supposed to behave and how misbehaving would be punished. Such common knowledge served to further filter out the noncooperative individuals and minimize the extent of the enforcement required to promote peaceful behavior on the ushkuiniki's vessels. Thus, blood oaths were a potent method of securing cooperation on a ship and imposed severe costs on noncooperative individuals. Faced with a threat of capital punishment by a crew that was well equipped to act on this threat, even the most battle-proficient opportunists would reject the blood oath and leave.

To sum up, ritual combat and blood oaths ensured that only patient and loyal pirates got accepted into ushkuiniki crews. Opportunists declined the offers of ritual combat (unwilling to accept pre-voyage costs) or did not take blood oaths (faced with the prospect of punishment for noncooperative behavior). Alternatively, the vataman rejected some applicants at the ritual-combat stage if the latter sent a signal of aggressiveness by fighting back. Such practices ensured a nearly automatic enforcement of discipline and cooperation on the ushkuiniki vessels. Let us now test these observations with historical evidence of the ushkuiniki raids and formation of large ushkuiniki fleets.

IV. Evidence of the Ushkuiniki's Success

According to my interpretation, the rigorous screening mechanisms of the ushkuiniki should have made their piratical activities highly successful. Let us turn to historical evidence to test this argument. The first mentions of the ushkuiniki's raids are recorded in the eleventh century. Archaeological findings show that the Novgorod boyar Yuriy Rogovich pillaged the Yugra region with his fleet in 1096 (Yanin et al. 2004, pp. 98–102). Linevskiy et al. (1939, pp. 59–60) claim that in 1187, the ushkuiniki pillaged and burned the Swedish city of Sigtuna and returned with a trophy of grand bronze gates from the local cathedral.

Gumelev (2013) writes that in 1318, the ushkuiniki pillaged the Finnish city of Aboa, from which they took five years' worth of papal income tax that was due to be transported to Rome. According to Kloss (2000, p. 232), in 1360 the Russian pirates raided the Golden Horde town of Juketau and seized its treasury, after which they held a feast in the town of Kostroma. The Novgorod chronicle of 1365–66 (Mitchell and Forbes 1914, pp. 150–51) describes the Volga raid of

three large ushkuiniki fleets led by vatamans Esif Valfromievych, Vasily Fedorovich, and Olexander Obakunovich. The raid was highly successful and aimed mostly at pillaging the vessels and cities that belonged to the Tatars. However, Russian merchants along the river were not spared either.

Soloviev (1896, pp. 989–90) notes that during 1374, a fleet of approximately ninety ushkui (with 2,700 pirates) robbed some Russian settlements on the Volga River and then relocated to the Kama River, where the bandits pillaged Tatar settlements, including the city of Bolghar. The residents of the city paid a ransom equal to three hundred Novgorodian rubles so that the city would not be burned. It is difficult to properly estimate the value of the Novgorodian ruble, but historical evidence based on a debt note from 1389 shows that a single Novgorodian ruble could be exchanged for two hundred squirrel furs (Brokgauz and Efron 2004, pp. 205–6). At the same time, Nasonov (1955, p. 113) writes that a woodworker could receive about one Novgorodian ruble for working an entire year. Accordingly, just for a single successful venture, a crew of about thirty ushkuiniki could receive more than a few years' worth of annual wages of a regular worker, thus rendering their robbery highly profitable. The value of the ushkuiniki plunder in some ventures is comparable to that obtained by Western pirates—for instance, when a pirate crew led by Captain John Evans obtained nine thousand British pounds' worth of booty and split it among thirty people, netting each pirate approximately three hundred pounds, when an annual wage amounted to approximately twenty-four pounds (Leeson 2007, p. 1078).

After the pillaging of Bolghar, one-half of the ushkuiniki fleet continued to rob the settlements south of the river, while the other group captured the city of Vyatka and turned it into a new base of pirate operations (Kostomarov 1994, pp. 155–56). The city prospered and expanded into a plethora of smaller towns, such as Kotelnych, Slobodskoy, and Orlov (Emmausskiy 2000, pp. 2–13). With a new base of operations securely established, the ventures of the ushkuiniki became more bold. The year 1375 marks one of the bloodiest episodes of ushkuiniki history: a fleet of 1,500 to 2,000 pirates on board seventy ushkui annihilated the city of Kostroma. Bernadskiy (1961, p. 43) states that the pirates stayed in the city for a week and obtained so much loot that they only took the most valuable prizes with them, and the rest was sunk or set ablaze. Afterward, the fleet continued its plunder, burning Nizhniy Novgorod and then pillaging the Tatar city of Sarai. In the 1390s, the ushkuiniki began to raid the lands of the

Moscow princedom, in particular the cities of Ustug and Belozersk. In 1436 the ushkuiniki were able to capture the prince of Yaroslavl and his wife, receiving four hundred Novgorodian rubles as ransom (Marasanova 2007, pp. 67–68).

However, by the second half of the fifteenth century, the powers of the Moscow princedom began to rapidly increase. Fearing their demise, the ushkuiniki from Vyatka joined forces with the armies of Moscow in 1471 to take over Novgorod, hoping to secure their independence by siding with Moscow. In spite of this alliance, in 1489 Ivan III ordered an army of sixty-four thousand men to assault Vyatka (Telitsyn 2013, pp. 191–93). The city fell in three days, the local vatamans were hanged, and other city residents were either captured or expelled to the nearby forests. The subjugation of the two key ushkuiniki centers led to a swift decline in the activities of the Russian pirates. The Moscow princedom continued to employ their services in various war campaigns in the early sixteenth century, but afterward the ushkuiniki were no longer heard of.

The ushkuiniki were, of course, not perfect in their raids. Sometimes their operations were disrupted by their love of alcohol. For example, in 1375 the khan of Astrakhan lured the ushkuiniki into a false sense of security with a generous tribute and offerings of alcohol. This allowed him to launch a sneak attack on the pirates that were drunk on land and soundly defeat them (Telitsyn 2013, p. 226). In 1409 a fleet of 250 ushkui under vataman Anfal pillaged the settlements and merchant ships along the Volga and Kama Rivers but was ultimately defeated by the Tatars because of a series of strategic errors. This event put a halt to ushkuiniki activities for a short time (Telitsyn 2013, pp. 180–85). The literature also notes a single case of conflict among the ushkuiniki in 1449, when a pirate vessel from Novgorod was sunk by the Vyatka pirates (Kostomarov 1994, p. 159).

This historical evidence, of course, must be treated with caution, as there might be a survivorship bias. The majority of the documented events highlight successful ventures of the Russian pirates, leaving out the more modest or failed raids. And the evidence of one case of conflict does not imply the absence of more conflicts that may have been left out of manuscripts and chronicles. Accordingly, my proposed interpretation must remain tentative in the absence of stronger evidence and counterfactuals.

V. Conclusion

My research describes the mechanisms that enabled the ushkuiniki pirates to overcome governance challenges on their vessels. However, my account is not exhaustive and may be complemented by pursuing at least three lines of research. First, it might be necessary to uncover more evidence about the formation of the ushkuiniki fleets. Ritual combat and blood oaths may have prevented most intervessel violence, as vessels' interactions were carried out by patient, cooperative individuals belonging to the same profession. However, could these large-scale cooperative arrangements have been supplemented by other means? Historical sources do not mention any explicit agreements between the vatamans. Yet the literature strongly hints that Christianity and the worship of maritime patron saints may have played a role in further reducing conflict between the ushkuiniki (Dorofeev 2010, p. 191). Perhaps this religious commonality also enhanced the cooperative tendencies of the Russian pirates.

Second, the study of Vyatka demands more attention. De facto, after its occupation by the ushkuiniki, the city became the Russian version of the infamous Tortuga. Accordingly, analysis of governance institutions within Vyatka might be quite productive to see whether the ushkuiniki employed different institutional arrangements for decision-making on a citywide scale. However, the task might be challenging because of a lack of coherent literature, which is implied by Kostomarov (1989, p. 155) in his assessment of Vyatka as one of the "darkest patches" in Russian history.

Third, it may be productive to examine the Russian Cossacks, as some authors claim the Cossacks' traditions and some of their governance institutions directly descended from the traditions and institutions of the ushkuiniki (Dukarev 2018). A comparative analysis could then show the evolution in institutions that the Cossacks may have inherited from the ushkuiniki.

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