



Information and Empire

Mechanisms of Communication in Russia

1600-1850

EDITED BY SIMON FRANKLIN AND KATHERINE BOWERS



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and Katherine Bowers*

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III.
NEWS AND POST IN RUSSIA

5. Communication and Obligation: The Postal System of the Russian Empire, 1700–1850

John Randolph

In 1854, the Imperial Russian Historical Society published a portrait, in numbers, of Russia's postal system. 3,950 relay stations, the Society reported, formed the system's spine. Mail couriers, imperial officials, and even private travellers could find at these "posts" all manner of travel necessities—above all, fresh drivers and draft animals. The stations were spaced at intervals, along some 85,000 *versts* (roughly 90,500 kilometres) of relay roads.¹ 16,510 mail couriers rode these routes with bags of correspondence; tens of thousands more labourers (men, women, and children) served the stations and drove wagons and sledges between them. Finally there were the horses, the prime motors of the post. The Division calculated that the empire harnessed 50,534 horses for its relays, alongside 432 reindeer and 1,800 dogs. On their backs, or in the vehicles they drew, some 733 Russian towns received deliveries of packages and letters. Most towns got mail twice a week, though 63 cities received mail 6 times a week—and Kamchatka twice a year.²

1 This figure excluded Poland and Finland.

2 I. A. Gan, 'O pochtakh v Rossii', in *Sbornik statisticheskikh svedenii o Rossii, izdavaemyi Statisticheskim otdeleniem Imperatorskogo Russkogo istoricheskogo obshchestva* (St Petersburg: Tipografiia Imperatorskoi Akademii nauk, 1854), p. 37, pp. 44–46. These counts align with others from the early nineteenth century.

The historian John Hyslop once called the postal roads of the Inca Empire—at least 23,000 kilometres in length—“South America’s largest contiguous archaeological remain”.³ While the material culture of Russia’s postal system is mostly buried—a good part of it under modern Russian roads—the whole must be regarded as a similarly massive monument of the Russian Empire. By the end of the eighteenth century, this relay network traversed the realm as few other official institutions did. Close studies of rural Russia in the pre-industrial period often describe it as under-governed, or even “ungoverned”.⁴ Yet the relays gave the Russian Empire a localised expression in both urban and rural areas, on the frontier as well as in the centre: indeed, quite often in the middle of nowhere.⁵ And the presence of relay stations mattered not only because of the things they moved—most famously, people and mail—but because of the mandatory contributions the state demanded from local populations to move them.

Organisations “so stupendous and so costly that it baffles speech and writing” (as Marco Polo described the Mongol posts), imperial relay systems did not appear spontaneously.⁶ Rather, empires created their posts by requisitioning the necessary resources from local people, a technique of power employed from ancient history well into the nineteenth century. Animals, food, fodder, shelter, labour, harness, and wagons: everything essential to support the relays might be demanded, on terms that were variously exploitative—and sometimes paired with ameliorating privileges—but never voluntary. For this reason, imperial communications exerted a noticeable and usually unwanted pressure on local societies. Thomas Allsen calls the Mongol Empire’s system of relay obligation “one of the most widespread and distasteful of labor

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- 3 John Hyslop, *The Inka Road System* (Orlando: Academic Press, 1984), p. xii, p. 3.
 - 4 On the lack of official institutions in rural life, see Steven L. Hoch, *Serfdom and Social Control in Russia: Petrowskoe, A Village in Tambov* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 1.
 - 5 For a thoughtful discussion of the post’s role as a ‘Grundbedingung staatlicher Machtpräsenz’, Roland Cvetkovski, *Modernisierung durch Beschleunigung: Raum und Mobilität im Zarenreich* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 2006), p. 114, *passim*.
 - 6 Marco Polo, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, trans. by Ronald Latham (London: Penguin Classics, 1958), p. 151.

duties”.⁷ The sentiment is common across the experience of empire, providing one of history’s few constants.⁸ “Of all the burdens which lie upon a subject”, the Swedish King Gustavus Adolphus conceded to his people in 1613, “there is none greater, none more irritating, and none more troublesome”.⁹

Calculated by governments according to a variety of formulae, and used to bear varying amounts of traffic, such obligations might be a marginal “irritation” in some areas and the central fact of life in others. Russian provincial governors in the early nineteenth century, for example, counted relay obligations by the “soul” (that is, per adult local man registered on the census). The merchants of Astrakhan were required to provide one horse for every eighty “souls” in their community in 1801; local Tatars, one for every twenty-five or thirty-five. Some particularly obligated villages bore relay burdens as high as three horses for every twenty-eight souls.¹⁰ And with these horses came other demands: not only for each animal itself, but also for the fodder, shelter, labour and vehicles necessary to serve it at the stations. Such impositions remained the foundation of both mail and official

7 Thomas T. Allsen, *Mongol Imperialism: The Policies of the Grand Qan Möngke in China, Russia and the Islamic Lands, 1251–1259* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), p. 212.

8 Adam J. Silverstein, *Postal Systems in the Pre-Modern Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Anne Kolb, *Transport und Nachrichtentransfer im Römischen Reich* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2000); Peter Olbricht, *Das Postwesen in China unter der Mongolenherrschaft im 13. und 14. Jahrhundert* (Wiesbaden: O. Harrassowitz, 1954); Didier Gazagnadou, *La poste à relais: La diffusion d’une technique de pouvoir à travers de l’Eurasie. Chine-Islam-Europe* (Paris: Éditions Kimé, 1992); Colin J. Heywood, ‘The Ottoman Menzilhane and Ulak System in Rumeli in the Eighteenth Century’, in *Türkiye’nin Sosyal ve Ekonomik Tarihi (1071–1920)/Social and Economic History of Turkey (1071–1920): Papers Presented to the First International Congress on the Social and Economic History of Turkey*, ed. by Osman Okyar and Halil İnalçık (Ankara: Hacettepe University, 1980), pp. 179–86.

9 Michael Roberts, *Gustavus Adolphus: A History of Sweden, 1611–1632*, vol. 1 (London: Longman, Green & Co., 1953), p. 117. On the evolution of Swedish obligations thereafter, see Magnus Linnarsson, ‘The Development of the Swedish Post Office, c. 1600–1721’, in *Connecting the Baltic Area: The Swedish Postal System in the Seventeenth Century*, ed. by Heiko Droste (Huddinge: Södertörns högskola, 2011), pp. 25–47.

10 RGIA, coll. 1289, descr. 1, file 118 (‘O soobshchenii Gosudarstvennomu Sovetu svedenii ob’iasniaiushchikh ustroistvo pocht’ [1801]), ll 220–21. The communities in question here were the specially obligated “relay suburbs” (*iamskie slobody*), about which more below.

transportation throughout Russia until the mid-nineteenth century (and in some places stayed in force until the early Soviet period).¹¹

Communication and obligation thus go hand in hand in the history of imperial postal systems, in Russia as elsewhere. Since relay roads were generally supported through direct (if variable) demands on local societies rather than through monies paid out by central treasuries, the growth of the posts meant a corresponding expansion in the inherently unequal, and differentiating, geography of relay obligations. Yet scholarship about relay posts tends to foreground only one of these themes at a time, letting the other drop. This is true in Russian history, as well.

Before 1700, scholars focus on how the princes of Moscow used relay obligations to build official communications for their nascent Russian Empire. The Russian name for such duties—*iamskaia povinnost'*—takes its root from a Turkic word (*jam*, meaning “relay” or “post”), employed by the Mongol Empire to describe its relay system.¹² This, and other similarities, caused sharp historical debate in the nineteenth century over the degree to which Russia’s relays were inherited from Mongol Imperial practice. Most today would see it as a transformation, under Chinggisid inspiration, of a still older duty to support travelling royalty, called *podvoda* in Kievan Rus.¹³ Regardless of origin, relays and the obligations that supported them were crucial to Moscow’s rapid early

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- 11 F. I. Bunina provides the best overview of the evolution of relay obligations in the nineteenth century in F. I. Bunina *et al.*, *Materialy po istorii sviazi v Rossii. XVIII-nachalo XX vv.*, ed. by N. A. Mal'tseva (Leningrad: Ministerstvo sviazi SSSR, 1966), pp. 23–29. She portrays the system as gradually being transferred onto a commercial, rather than obligatory basis: that said, the late imperial and early Soviet systems still had recourse to transport obligations, see Yanni Kotsonis, *States of Obligation: Taxes and Citizenship in the Russian Empire and Early Soviet Republic* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014).
 - 12 Maks Fasmer, *Etimologicheskii slovar' russkogo iazyka*, trans. by O. N. Trubachev, vol. 4 (Moscow: Progress, 1973), p. 555; Allsen, *Mongol Imperialism*, p. 114.
 - 13 See I. P. Khrushchov, *Ocherk iamskikh i pochtovykh uchrezhdenii ot drevnikh vremen do tsarstvovaniia Ekateriny II* (St Petersburg: A. S. Suvorin, 1884), pp. 3–5; I. Ia. Gurliand, *Iamskaia gon'ba v moskovskom gosudarstve do kontsa XVII veka* (Iaroslavl: Tipografiia Gubernskogo Pravleniia, 1900), pp. 29–50; P. Miliukov, *Spornye voprosy finansovoi istorii Moskovskogo gosudarstva. Retsetsiia na sochinenie A. S. Lappo Danilevskogo, 'Organizatsiia priamogo oblozheniia v Moskovskom gosudarstve'* (St Petersburg: Tipografiia Akademii nauk, 1892), pp. 21–22; A. N. Vigilev, *Istoriia otechestvennoi pochty*, 2nd ed. (Moscow: Radio i sviaz', 1990), pp. 44–45; Donald Ostrowski, *Muscovy and the Mongols: Cross-Cultural Influences on the Steppe Frontier* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 47, pp. 119–21; Gustave Alef, ‘The Origin

modern extension to new conquests and frontiers, such as the White Sea, Kazan, Siberia, Ukraine, and the Baltic. “With each step further into new territory, relay institutions penetrated deeper into the country”, Ilia Gurliand argues in his foundational study of the early development of Russian relay transport.¹⁴

So the story goes until 1650. Histories of communication thereafter, however, typically concentrate on relay functions, rather than on relay obligations. In particular, scholars explore how kinds of postal services that developed across early modern Europe began to appear in Russia, and to what effect. Thus, for example, the organisation of the first regularly scheduled mail route (weekly between Moscow and Riga, in 1665) is often presented as marking the advent of “European”, “modern”, or “proper” posts in Russia.¹⁵ Previously couriers had been dispatched by the court only when needed. The reign of Peter the Great (1689–1725) is generally seen as accelerating this break, just as it supposedly energised other modernising currents of Russian life. Histories thereafter focus on charting the functional parameters of these new postal services: the growth of mail routes, for example, or their reliability or speed.¹⁶ The labour system supporting these innovations, meanwhile, recedes to the background of this history, if it is mentioned at all.

The following survey of Imperial Russian postal communications between 1700 and 1850 will try to strike a better balance. I will explore both the development of relay services during this period and the

and Early Development of the Muscovite Postal Service’, *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, New Series, 15. 1 (March 1967), 1–15.

14 Gurliand, *Iamskaia gon’ba*, p. 54.

15 This tradition goes back to the nineteenth century: see A. Brückner, *Die Europäisierung Russlands: Land und Volk* (Gotha: Friedrich Andreas Berthes, 1888), pp. 67–94; I. P. Kozlovskii, *Pervye pochty i pervye pochtmeistery v Moskovskom gosudarstve*, vol. 1 (Warsaw: Tipografia Varshavskogo uchebnogo okruga, 1913); Vigilev, *Istoriia otechestvennoi pochty*, p. 96.

16 Vigilev, *Istoriia otechestvennoi pochty*; Cvetkovski, *Modernisierung durch Beschleunigung*; D. A. Redin, *Administrativnye struktury i biurokratiia Urala v epokhu petrovskikh reform (zapadnye uezdy Sibirskoi gubernii v 1711–1727 gg.)* (Ekaterinburg: Volot, 2007). The best general histories of posts—including both obligation and service in its brief—are provided in Oleg Kationov’s studies of Siberia: O. N. Kationov, *Moskovsko-Sibirskii trakt i ego zhiteli v XVII–XIX vv.* (Novosibirsk: NGPU, 2004); O. N. Kationov, *Moskovsko-Sibirskii trakt kak osnovnaia sukhoputnaia transportnaia komunikatsiia Sibiri XVIII–XX vv.*, 2nd ed. (Novosibirsk: NGPU, 2008).

concurrent evolution of relay obligations to support them. Keeping both sides of the story in mind seems important, for it will allow us to create a more expansive history of the meanings produced by this old imperial technique as it entered the modern empire. As Georg Simmel observes in 'Bridge and Door', the creation of a connection across space does not merely allow packets of information to be transferred between two points. It also reshapes the landscape between them—thereby creating a new arena for the production of meaning. When people build a bridge, they make waters easier to cross, but they also reshape the rivers' banks to connect and support the new structure. The bridge focusses the interest of human community and polity to this spot, and not another, marking it on maps and devoting to it resources brought from elsewhere. In the same way, we might imagine that not only the people and things circulated by Russia's posts, but also the vast infrastructure of relay obligation that made their movements possible, gave meaning to the landscape of Russian empire.¹⁷

Or, at least, we might engage in such a line of interpretation if we had histories of communicative practices that accounted for both sides of the coin. The following reconstruction of the development of the Imperial Russian relay across the long eighteenth century is meant to help make such research possible. We may begin by stepping a little further back.

The first concrete testimonies to the existence of a postal system at the court of Moscow date to the fifteenth century. In particular, Prince Ivan III, "the Great" (1462–1505), whose conquest of Novgorod and its hinterlands laid the foundation for Muscovy's expansion into an empire, relied on horse relays extensively. Ivan III was so convinced of his post's importance that in his last will and testament he told his heirs to "keep relays and horses on the roads in those places, where relays and horses were kept in my time".¹⁸ He need not have worried: between his death in 1505 and 1650, Moscow's relay system grew with Muscovy itself, by leaps and bounds. The seventeenth-century tsardom developed nine main relay routes, radiating outward from Moscow in all directions,

17 Georg Simmel, 'Bridge and Door', in *Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings*, ed. by David Frisby and Mike Featherstone (London: Sage, 1997), pp. 170–74.

18 'Dukhovnaia gramota velikogo kniazia Ivana III Vasil'evicha', in *Dukhovnye i dogovornye gramoty velikikh i udel'nykh kniazei XIV–XVI vv.*, ed. by L. V. Cherepnin (Moscow and Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1950), p. 362.

like spokes of a wagon wheel.¹⁹ (This architecture remained constant throughout the imperial period, and indeed can be seen from Google’s “God’s eye” view of Russian highways to this day.) A central chancery, the “Relay Chancery” (*Iamskoi prikaz*), planned the relay roads and organised stations along them. It also issued authorising documents, called “route letters” (*podorozhnye gramoty*), which governed the use of relay resources. These “letters”, or requisitions, specified such things as the travellers’ names and titles, their origin and destination, and the number of horses to which they were entitled.

Administered by the Relay Chancery, the local forms of relay obligation supporting the system varied. In some places, populations were asked to work the relays themselves, detaching their horses from the plough to hook them to official wagons or sledges. (The chaos caused in everyday labour by such interruptions was one of the major irritations of relay duty.) Other communities—either unofficially, or by charter—pooled resources to hire permanent teams of designated “volunteers” (*okhotniki*) to do this relay driving for them. Still elsewhere, by the late sixteenth century, the Grand Principality began to organise special societies of the road, called “relay suburbs” (*iamskie slobody*). These communities bore higher levels of relay obligation, harnessing more horses to ferry more traffic. To make these burdens more bearable—and also to distinguish their particular place in Muscovite life—the suburbs were granted a changing (and locally variable) set of privileges: such as the use of arable land, the right to trade in towns, and a yearly allowance from the treasury. Over time, Gurliand argues in his classic study, this created the foundation for the emergence of the so-called *iamshchiki* (literally “relay men”, though women as well as children also lived in these communities) as a special social caste within the growing empire.²⁰

Muscovy’s posts supported the rapid but irregular transportation of royal couriers, and with them royal mail. Riders—or teams of officials and cargo in wagons—were only dispatched according to the sovereign’s needs. The middle of the seventeenth century saw the introduction

19 V. Z. Drobizhev, *Istoricheskaia geografiia SSSR* (Moscow: Vysshiaia shkola, 1973), pp. 160–66; A. S. Kudriavtsev, *Ocherki istorii dorozhnogo stroitel'stva v SSSR: Dooktiabr'skii period*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Dorizdat, 1951), pp. 78–104.

20 Gurliand, *Iamskaia gon'ba*, pp. 206–70, esp. pp. 220–23.

of new kinds of postal services to Russia, however. In particular, increasing commercial as well as diplomatic contacts with Western states encouraged the establishment of regular mail routes. These included lines to Riga (established 1665), Vilna (1667) and Archangel (1693). This “German” or “foreign post” (*nemetskaia pochta*), as the routes came to be called, possessed several novel features. It operated according to timed schedules (such as bi-weekly or weekly). It usually relied on sealed mail pouches that were relayed from station to station, rather than on couriers riding the whole route. Lastly, the “foreign post” transported merchants’ letters and other personal mail on a for-profit basis. In effect, all three lines—which were run by Dutch and Baltic immigrants to Moscow—were limited commercial concessions, granted to individuals by the tsars. Earning their own money from civilian use of the mail routes, these men promised to deliver the tsars’ own correspondence on a regular basis, in return.²¹

As Daniel Waugh and Ingrid Maier demonstrate in their chapter in this book, the information carried by the “foreign post” had great importance for the politics, culture and commerce of late seventeenth-century Muscovy. Yet the new routes did not have an equally transformative effect on Moscow’s existing system of relay communication. The “foreign post” did not, for instance, change the shape or size of Russia’s relay roads. The basic, wagon-wheel structure of routes from Moscow, including those through which the Riga, Vilna, and Archangel posts would run, had existed since Ivan III’s time.²² Nor did the “foreign post” disrupt the Muscovite practice of supporting postal relays through obligation. Quite the contrary: the tsars allowed the families organising these new routes to exploit the horses and riders provided by obligated communities. In effect, they privatised the profit from an imperial duty into the hands of a series of entrepreneurs.²³

21 Kozlovskii, *Pervye pochty*, vol. 1, pp. 99-111, pp. 145-55, pp. 299-312; Vigilev, *Istoriia otechestvennoi pochty*, pp. 98-118, pp. 147-62.

22 Kudriavtsev, *Ocherki istorii dorozhnogo stroitel'stva*, vol. 1, pp. 72-80; Vigilev, *Istoriia otechestvennoi pochty*, p. 147.

23 N. I. Sokolov, *Sankt-Peterburgskaia pochta pri Petre Velikom* (St Petersburg: Tipografiia Ministerstva Vnutrennikh Del, 1903), p. 9; Kozlovskii, *Pervye pochty*, vol. 1, pp. 102-11, p. 164; I. P. Kozlovskii, *Pervye pochty i pervye pochthmeistery v Moskovskom gosudarstve*, vol. 2 (Warsaw: Tipografiia Varshavskogo uchebnogo okruga, 1913), pp. 3-39; Vigilev, *Istoriia otechestvennoi pochty*, pp. 102-18, pp. 130-40. The best detailed examination of the Riga services’ initial functioning is Daniel C. Waugh’s

As it happened, even this organisational outsourcing was only temporary. In 1701, the Vinius family—the last of the original concessionaires—was forced to relinquish control of the Riga, Archangel, and Vilna posts.²⁴ Peter transferred control of the “foreign post” into the hands of his powerful favourite and diplomat Petr Shafirov. Shafirov was later to claim that the routes and the profits they generated were a personal reward for his services; perhaps not coincidentally, he fell into disgrace for corruption in the early 1720s.²⁵ For a brief moment, it seemed that the “foreign post” might be combined, in its management, with the old relay system, still managed by the Relay Chancery.²⁶ Yet in the end, this “overseas post” (as the routes were also known) remained in the hands of powerful favourites who operated on the international stage (such as Heinrich Johann Friedrich Ostermann, in the 1730s). Its management was handled by the College of Foreign Affairs—through whose coffers its earnings also flowed—rather than the Relay Chancery.

Rather than transforming the geography, social underpinnings, or even the functions of Russia’s imperial postal system, the “foreign post” thus spun off as a specially-managed, profit-seeking enterprise. Ceasing by 1703 to be a commercial concession, its portfolio of regularised relay routes was attached to one particular branch of the state and the grandees in charge of it. This division of Russia’s postal services, old and new, remained in place for several decades to come.²⁷ To find the beginnings of more profound break in the history of Imperial Russian

unpublished 2015 manuscript, ‘The Beginnings of the Muscovite Foreign Post in its European Context’, pp. 10–22. I am grateful to Professor Waugh for letting me consult this essay.

24 Vigilev, *Istoriia otechestvennoi pochty*, pp. 133–34.

25 See his remarks to that effect in a report attached to RGADA, coll. 248, descr. 16, bk. 1065, fol. 43 (‘O soderzhanii pochty v Rossiiskom gosudarstve’.)

26 In 1722, the Petrine government imagined fusing the whole of postal administration—including the “foreign post” and the Relay Chancery—in the hands of a Post-Director-General; but though the decree survives this merger did not, and the Relay Chancery and the “foreign post” existed side by side until the 1780s, when a central postal administration was finally created. See *Polnoe sobranie zakonov Rossiiskoi imperii*, Series 1 (1649–1825) (hereafter PSZ 1), no. 4073. As a result, the organisation of local post offices long remained a responsibility unclearly divided between the Relay Chancery and local governors. See Vigilev, *Istoriia otechestvennoi pochty*, pp. 260–64, pp. 294–301.

27 Sokolov, *Sankt-Peterburgskaia pochta pri Petre Velikom*, pp. 137–50; Vigilev, *Istoriia otechestvennoi pochty*, pp. 134–35, pp. 263–67.

relay practice, meanwhile, we need to look to the 1710s, and to deep changes in the organisational structure of the empire itself.²⁸

In 1712, Tsar Petr Alekseevich (later crowned Peter I) shifted the seat of his government to St Petersburg and his empire's newly-conquered Northwestern frontier on the Baltic. The move to St Petersburg signaled Russia's rise as a power in Europe, displacing Swedish authority in the North. But it also raised the problem of how to connect the new but peripheral capital to the empire's main body. These concerns became even more pressing when Peter and his advisers sought to reform imperial governance, as well. In 1711, the tsar created a central Senate, to coordinate in St Petersburg the activities of Moscow's old chanceries; in 1717, he started to eliminate many of the latter altogether, in favour of a smaller number of Petersburg-based colleges. To make improved local partners for these new central institutions, meanwhile, Peter reworked the system of territorially-based "governments" (or provinces) he had established a decade earlier. Entrusting the management of these territories to hand-picked intendants and military commanders, he expected them to be responsible to the new central bureaucracy in St Petersburg.²⁹

The result, however, was still a two-legged stool. The new central and provincial administrations were perceived to be inefficient, without better communications to support them. As Heinrich Fick (one of Peter's closest advisers) observed in 1718,

The Colleges cannot manage their affairs, unless a proper saddle-post is started at least once a week between the chief towns and governments of the State.

Both the geography and the timetable of imperial relay communications had to change, Fick argued, "if Your Highness's enlightened and most caring intentions for the State Colleges are to be fulfilled". Nor was Fick

28 In support of this periodisation, see Sokolov, *Sankt-Peterburgskaia pochta pri Petre Velikom*, p. 22.

29 On the Collegial and Provincial reforms in general, see Claes Peterson, *Peter the Great's Administrative and Judicial Reforms: Swedish Antecedents and the Process of Reception*, trans. Michael F. Metcalf (Stockholm: A.-B. Nordska, 1979), pp. 52–67, pp. 242–49; A. B. Kamenskii, *Ot Petra I do Pavla I. Reformy v Rossii XVIII veka. Opyt tselostnogo analiza* (Moscow: Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi gumanitarnyi universitet, 1999), pp. 116–17.

the first to make this observation: five years earlier, when the Senate was created, Shafirov had said much the same thing.³⁰

Already in 1712, designated mail routes (for on-demand use) had been planned between St Petersburg and the provinces. In response to Fick's 1718 memorandum, Peter declared that these new internal "posts" (*pochty*) should be multiplied and operated on a timed, regular basis.

Posts should be arranged first between St Petersburg and all the chief towns where Governors now reside; then the master of the post, consulting with the Governors, should designate routes from those towns to others further away, as needed.³¹

It should be observed that these new provincial mail routes altered not only the timetable but also the geography of relay communications in the empire. No longer a wagon-wheel set of main highways meant to connect Moscow with its borders, the relay system of the eighteenth century was envisaged as a finely branching network for internal communication, a web that extended inward and between the main lines. Its chief purpose was not the conduct of diplomatic relations with rival powers—or commercial ties with foreign interests, which as before ran through the "foreign post"—but rather the coordination of "central" and "provincial" institutions within Russia. Implicit in this conception was a great expansion in the network of relay stations, and with them relay obligation, in the century to come.³²

In this respect, the name chosen for this new system—the "relay post", or *iamskaia pochta*—was significant. It reflected both the fact that the mail rode on relay horses and that local communities would continue to provide them (along with labour and other travel resources), through the *iamskaia povinnost'*. Spurning the entrepreneurial experiment of the "foreign post", Peter and his advisers thus planned for a continuation of the imperial relay technique they inherited. That is not to say that the

30 *PSZ* 1, no. 3208.

31 'Vysochaishie rezoliutsii na memorial inozemtsa Fika', pp. 574–75; the construction of these new, "ordinary" (that is, regular) posts was confirmed in 1720: *PSZ* 1, nos. 3591 and 3691, discussed below.

32 One of the first actions the government took in response to the decree on provincial posts was to conduct a survey of the existing relay network and "how it is maintained". This fascinating document is RGADA, coll. 248, bk. 1065, fols. 42–115, 'O soderzhanii pochty v Rossiiskom gosudarstve'. Quotation, fol. 43.

relays were placed entirely outside of markets in transportation services. Quite the contrary, to reinforce the existing system for the additional burdens of the eighteenth century, the St Petersburg government sought to stabilise relay communities by giving them a special status within roadside markets.

Peter established this principle in 1713, in a decree entitled “On the Settlement of *Iamshchiki* in St Petersburg Province”.³³ The primary aim of this decree was to shore up the society of the Petersburg road, by commanding that hundreds of *iamshchik* households be resettled, from other provinces, to the stations between Moscow and St Petersburg. Though families from as far away as Kiev, Azov, and Kazan were indeed sent, the settlements seem not to have taken hold.³⁴ The agricultural lands near St Petersburg were difficult to work, the demands of relay obligation high, and no matter how often they were replanted relay villages did not thrive there in the early part of the eighteenth century. By 1720, nearly two thirds of the 150 *iamshchik* households settled at Tosna (near St Petersburg) had fled or “died out”; as late as 1740, the government was still trying to get officials around Russia to find and return fugitive coachmen from the Petersburg road.³⁵

Yet if Peter’s 1713 *ukaz* failed in its stated purpose, it nonetheless contained clauses codifying the economy of relay obligation, in a manner that stuck for the century to follow. Henceforth, Peter decreed, no one should use relay horses for free (*darom*), “neither for State nor for particular needs”. Instead, people travelling on requisitioned horses were to pay specified, per-*verst* fees (*progony*) directly “into the hands of the coachmen, and not to the Chancery or to Commissars”. (These payments were to be based on a new formula Peter included: 1 kopek per *verst* from Petersburg to Novgorod, ½ a kopek per *verst* elsewhere.³⁶) Relay horses and wagons, it was further specified, should only be used for travel (*proezd*), and not for freight (*klad*). This latter clause not only limited the literal weight of relay obligations, it also stood at the centre of the licit

33 *PSZ* 1, no. 2741.

34 See also *PSZ* 1, no. 2833.

35 See *PSZ* 1, no. 3600; and *PSZ* 1, no. 8031.

36 This differential pricing scheme—whereby the Petersburg road charged higher rates, while the mileage fees in the provinces were smaller—would continue into the nineteenth century. Indeed, for much of the eighteenth century, the fees remained exactly these.

market for transport services Peter wished to develop around the relay stations. Outlawing the transport of freight via relay obligations, he authorised all travellers to “hire peasants or relay coachmen not under their normal obligation, but for a free price”.³⁷

In this way, Peter’s 1713 decree became a kind of a charter, explicitly defining the intersection of imperial obligations, postal services, and transportation markets on which the relay system stood. Peter himself seems to have assigned its provisions broad significance, declaring it should apply “not only along that road, but throughout the entire State”.³⁸ More importantly, and regardless of his intentions, this 1713 decree took on a life of its own after his death. In court cases and petitions filed by obligated communities throughout the century that followed, the 1713 decree is cited as the foundation of the society of the road’s rights; it has the same role in an official guide to the post published in 1803.³⁹

Some of the decree’s provisions, it should be said, were not novel. Mileage fees (*progomy*) had been paid to someone—if not necessarily directly “into the hands of coachmen”—on a *per-verst* charge since the sixteenth century.⁴⁰ In the absence of clear evidence to the contrary, we must presume that relay communities had long been in the informal business of transporting “particular” travellers and goods, for a price. Their concentrations of valuable human and horse power were surely too valuable to lay idle.

By codifying this practice for “the entire State”, however, Peter’s 1713 decree set the old relay system on a novel path. Unofficial, “particular” travel was now an explicitly licenced function of the system, rather than an informal local arrangement; people bearing relay obligations were likewise ubiquitously chartered to sell passenger and freight services

37 *PSZ* 1, no. 2741.

38 *Ibid.*

39 *Noveishii Rossiiskii dorozhnik, verno pokazuiushchii vse pochtovyie puti Rossiiskoi Imperii i novoprisoedinennykh ot Partii Osmanskoi i Respubliki Pol'skoi oblastei* (St Petersburg: Imperatorskaia Tipografiia, 1803), p. 279. See also Sokolov, *Sankt-Peterburgskaia pochta pri Petre Velikom*, p. 22.

40 The Muscovite government had tried to quantify the monies needed to travel across the realm, so that they could be paid (by petitioners seeking official action) in the fifteenth century, as in the ‘Decree on Travel’ in the famous judicial code of 1497: S. I. Shtamm, *Sudebnik 1497 goda* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo iuridicheskoi literatury, 1955), pp. 83–86.

at the stations. Civil and commercial on a state-wide scale, no longer restricted to the Sovereign's use, the relay was becoming, in effect, a public institution of the Russian Empire. Yet this institution was being built within an old imperial framework, extending back centuries (and indeed millennia in other contexts). The "particular" market in relay travel the 1713 decree imagined was meant to make the old practice of relay obligation more bearable, and to prevent the communities it touched from breaking down, rather than to replace this system altogether.

Two types of services lay at the heart of Peter's ambition for the posts: regular mail delivery (*pochta*) and relay transportation (*proezd*). Both were meant, first and foremost, to support official communication, in particular the circulation of decrees and personnel throughout the empire. This priority found expression in basic decisions about how these functions were organised, which remained in force deep into the nineteenth century. After some hesitation, for example, Peter's government decided that official mail would be carried by the system "without payment". One hundred years later, a member of Alexander I's Permanent Council blamed this privilege—which fully externalised the cost of official mail—for "the excessive correspondence, that so greatly burdens all branches of government today".⁴¹ Notions of rank (*chin*) had been used to codify the number of horses a man could demand in the seventeenth century; Peter maintained this practice in his newly reformed Russia as well. Thus, according to a schedule published in 1721 but still cited as normative in 1824, a general or Senator could demand up to fifteen horses for his official use at a station, while a privy councillor could expect seven and a travelling translator one.⁴²

How did these services work? The relay-driven "regular mail"—*ordinarnaia* or *obyknovennaia pochta*, imagined in 1718 and further elaborated in 1720—was essentially an inter-urban service, connecting St Petersburg to the empire at large.⁴³ Regular mail delivery within towns began to be organised only in the second quarter of the nineteenth

41 *Arkhiv Gosudarstvennogo soveta*, vol. 3, pt. 2 (St Petersburg: Tipografiia Vtorogo Otdeleniia sobstvennogo Ego Imperatorskogo Velichestva Kantseliarii, 1878), p. 848.

42 *PSZ* 1, no. 3855.

43 *PSZ* 1, no. 3691.

century.⁴⁴ Though this service was initially designed to deliver “letters and decrees from all the Colleges and Chanceries to Moscow, and thence where needed”, in October 1720 the Relay Chancery received instructions to “accept and deliver all manner of personal letters, except merchants’ letters (which are accepted and delivered, upon scheduled payment, at the special post established at the Foreign College)”.⁴⁵

To handle this mail, the following regulations were established in the 1720s. (Though details varied over time, and a special “heavy post” was added for large parcels in the 1780s, the same basic procedures guided the operation of the posts until the mid-nineteenth century.)⁴⁶ First, correspondence was to be brought, wrapped and addressed, to one of the new post offices set up in major towns. The postmaster then was supposed to log the origin and destination of the parcel in a ledger, and collect a fee for its delivery. (For much of the eighteenth century, postage rates depended upon both destination and weight, with deliveries on some routes costing more than others. In 1785, however, a universal tariff based on weight and distance was announced.)⁴⁷ Adhesive stamps, marking payment of postage, were not adopted until the mid-nineteenth century. Even so, starting in the mid-eighteenth century, post offices possessed postmarks, used to mark each letter or package once the proper fees had been collected and it had been accepted for delivery by the post.⁴⁸

At some regular interval—twice a week in the capitals and weekly elsewhere, to start, though with greater frequency as the system developed—all the mail so collected was placed into a special pouch. The postmaster then added a contents list or “register” (*reestr*) to

44 See *Bol'shoi filatelisticheskii slovar'*, ed. by N. I. Vladinets, *et. al.* (Moscow: Radio i sviaz', 1988), p. 66.

45 *PSZ* 1, no. 3691; *PSZ* 1, no. 6987; and *PSZ* 1, no. 3591. See also Sokolov, *Sankt-Peterburgskaia pochta pri Petre Velikom*, pp. 133–37.

46 See *PSZ* 1, no. 3691 and compare it with, e.g., *PSZ* 1, no. 13400; *Pochtovyi dorozhnik* (1824), pp. 436–40. On the division of the regular mail into “light” and “heavy” deliveries, see *PSZ* 1, no. 15330.

47 For an initial schedule of fees, see *PSZ* 1, no. 4814; numerous subsequent decrees specify the weight charges for further provincial lines, as they are built (see nos. 6376, 6987, 8911, 9929, 12961, 13861, etc.) across the eighteenth century. Finally, in 1785, a general tariff by distance and weight was ordered, as became practice in the nineteenth century. See *PSZ* 1, no. 15875.

48 M. A. Dobin, *Pochtovye shtempelia Rossiiskoi Imperii: domarochnyi period*, 3rd ed. (St. Petersburg: Standart Kolleksiia, 2009), 9–15.

the bag, noting all the parcels the pouch contained as well as their destinations. The bag was then sealed, and entrusted to the first of the many postillions (*pochtaliony*), who relayed it from station to station. Although these riders might travel on a single saddle horse, the Relay Chancery was instructed to authorise up to three horses, with accompanying harness, for each mail delivery.⁴⁹ Keeping ready a constant supply of these special “postal” horses—in addition to relay horses for transportation use—became an additional burden on relay communities. The arrival of postal deliveries was scheduled according to an estimate of how long it would take to travel from the previous station; only one, or at the most two hours, was to pass between the arrival and departure of any given delivery.⁵⁰ In Petrine times, mail riders were expected to travel at an average speed of eight *versts* an hour. Target speeds were later adjusted seasonally, according to regulations of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, with eight *versts* per hour being expected in the muddy months of spring and fall, and ten or even twelve *versts* per hour being the norm for summer or winter.⁵¹

All along the way, at each intervening post office, the pouch was to be opened and its register inspected. Letters arriving to their destination—or that had to be transferred to side-routes—were removed; new mail was likewise added, with the list adjusted accordingly. The time and day logged, the pouch was then re-sealed, and dispatched to its final destination. When it arrived there, and its last contents were finally removed, a copy of the completed register was prepared and sent back to the original post office. At this point, so the 1720 instructions direct, mail was to be “given out” to its recipients. Though there was no regular delivery of mail within towns, messengers were evidently sent from post offices to official institutions and important people; both officials and “particular” recipients, meanwhile, could also send servants or come themselves to collect their parcels.⁵²

49 PSZ 1, no. 3691; Sokolov, *Sankt-Peterburgskaia pochta pri Petre Velikom*, pp. 19–20.

50 ‘Ob uchrezhdenii pochty v raznykh gorodakh’, p. 276.

51 Sokolov, *Sankt-Peterburgskaia pochta pri Petre Velikom*, p. 126. See also PSZ 1, no. 13435; *Pochtovyi dorozhnik (1824)*, p. 432.

52 PSZ 1, no. 3691.

Travel by “relay” or “postal” horses was the other service supported by Russia’s postal system. It was governed by its own set of official procedures, as well as by informal practices (both legal and illegal) that developed around the relays’ transportation markets. Travellers who were issued official requisitions had the right to demand fresh horses, in set quantities and at set mileage rates.⁵³ At each new station, they were required to present their “route letters” to a local stationmaster (*upravitel'*), who was typically a retired soldier. After inspecting the document and recording its data in his own logbook, the stationmaster calculated the mileage charges due for the next link, demanding payment in advance. A station elder (*starosta*) was then in charge of rallying the required horses and drivers, upon the signal of the stationmaster. These horses were harnessed to the traveller’s carriage, and local relay men seated on the box or the front horse as drivers and guides, and the traveller was once again en route.⁵⁴

Unfortunately, few of the local log books documenting the use of travel requisitions survive. The ones that do, however, testify to the requisitioning of thousands of horses for relay travel in central Russian cities. In Vladimir in 1741, horses were requisitioned 3,915 times for relay duty; in Murom, 2,713; in Moscow in 1737, by another official count, 7,607 horses were demanded for relay transport, alongside nearly 3,200 more for mail and packet service. In these central Russian towns, at least, the dispatch of horses provided by obligated communities was a daily occurrence.⁵⁵

In 1717, the Senate decreed that such requisitioned transports could be used by people travelling for “their own needs”, but only if they paid twice the official mileage fees.⁵⁶ Though literature of the late eighteenth

53 Periodically, the government needed to crack down on the range of institutions issuing such requisitions, to prevent their overuse. In 1742, for example, the government sought to forbid the use of pre-printed requisition “blanks”, claiming that they were too freely distributed and contributed to the immiseration of relay communities. *PSZ* 1, no. 8509.

54 For Petrine era practices—which again held true, with variants, for the century that followed—see *PSZ* 1, no. 4073; *Pochtovyi dorozhnik* (1824), pp. 425–32.

55 The logbooks for Vladimir and Murom are preserved in the archive of the Relay Chancery: see RGADA, coll. 290, descr. 16, file 337, fol. 195 and RGADA, coll. 290, descr. 16, file 336, fol. 147. A corruption case from the Senate archives, meanwhile, provides the Moscow figures: see RGADA, coll. 248, descr. 1071, fol. 399.

56 *PSZ* 1, no. 3075.

and nineteenth centuries abounds with references to such a practice, it is not clear how quickly it began to be used. In the Vladimir and Murom logbooks from the 1740s, for example, there are only a few elusive entries that suggest use of the system for a personal purpose; the vast majority of entries document travel by ranked servitors, as authorised by the Relay Chancery or provincial governors for some official purpose. As in other empires, the practice of charging lower rates for official travel created a strong incentive for elites to claim this status even when travelling for “particular” ends. Quite often, it seems, men of stature travelling for “their own needs” simply demanded the cheaper, official rate; the few women mentioned in the logbooks are listed as the wives and daughters of servitors (and not as independent travellers themselves). Numerous petitions from local communities, alongside central decrees, bemoan private use of official rates as a disruptive “abuse”. Yet, though banned legally and protested (sometimes violently) at the stations, the practice seems to have been quite difficult to curb.⁵⁷

Just as importantly, however, the existence of the official relay network encouraged modes of civilian travel that drew on resources provided by the system, but did not engage its formal system for requisitioning labour. The regularly spaced markets for food, shelter, horses, and labour the routes provided were key. In addition to licensing these markets, the imperial government advertised their existence. As early as 1733, the yearly official almanac published in St Petersburg began to include information about Russia’s posts. In 1762, this section spun off into a separately published series of itineraries (*dorozhniki*) that listed routes, stations, and the distances between them. These guides allowed travellers to chart and calculate the stages of their journeys, and to imagine the rest stops that might be available to them.⁵⁸ Building

57 For “individuals trying to pass themselves off” as officials to use the Mongol post, see Allsen, *Mongol Imperialism*, p. 213. Senate cases protesting personal abuse of obligated transports include RGADA, coll. 248, descr. 16, bk. 1069, no. 36, fol. 174; RGADA, coll. 248, descr. 16, bk. 1069, no. 30, fol. 147–147v. Both are from the 1730s; decrees across the eighteenth century sought to clamp down on the practice, evidently unsuccessfully. See, e.g., *PSZ* 1, nos. 2491, 3045, 3488, 8035, 8166, 8836.

58 *Dorozhnoi kalendar’ na 1762 god, s opisaniem pochtovykh stanov v Rossiiskom gosudarstve* (St Petersburg: Imperatorskaia Akademiia nauk, 1762); V. G. Ruban, *Dorozhnik chuzhezemnyi i rossiiskii i poverstnaia kniga rossiiskogo gosudarstva* (St Petersburg: Tipografiia Veitbrakhta i Shnoora, 1777); *Rossiiskii pocht-kalendar’, s pokazaniem razstoianii vsekh gorodov Rossiiskoi Imperii* (St Petersburg: Gubernskoe Pravlenie,

from this infrastructure, various alternative civilian travel practices developed, at least for those permitted, in general, to travel. Although internal controls limiting the movement of women, serfs, royal peasants, and other categories of the population lie beyond the scope of this chapter, it should not be forgotten that they existed.⁵⁹

Most simply, people owning draft animals could and did travel postal roads “on their own [horses]” (*na svoikh*). This required frequent rest stops for the animals, and thus was inevitably slower; by the same token, it was cheaper, requiring the purchase of labour and supplies only as needed. It was also possible to travel by hiring fresh teams of horses locally, at each stage. This practice was known as travelling “on free horses” (*na vol'nykh*). The expense involved was unpredictable, being subject to constant haggling and negotiation. Yet according to many accounts it seems to have been tolerable within central Russia. Foreign travel writers, for example, often praise the cheapness of this arrangement, by comparison with the European posts with which they were familiar. With time this practice seems to have become more organised, with drivers from separate villages working in combination. According to the famed statistician Heinrich Storch writing in 1803, peasants organised their own stable relay networks along important highways, complete with “Kommissars” in the major towns to promote and represent these long-distance services.⁶⁰ Unfortunately, unlike the state system, such businesses seem to have left no archives behind them. Last, but not least, it was not unknown to hire teams of horses and drivers for entire journeys.⁶¹

How reliably, how comfortably, did these relay practices work? Better than one might suppose. Today, Russian roads are legendarily

1800); I. P. Kondakov, ed., *Svodnyi katalog russkoi knigi grazhdanskoi pečati XVIII veka, 1725–1800*, vol. 4 (Moscow: Kniga, 1966), p. 216, p. 227.

59 V. G. Chernukha, *Pasport v Rossii, 1719–1917* (St Petersburg: Liki Rossii, 2007); John Randolph and Eugene M. Avrutin, ‘Introduction’, in *Russia in Motion: Cultures of Human Mobility since 1850*, ed. by Randolph and Avrutin (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), p. 14, n. 25.

60 Heinrich Storch, *Historisch-statistisches Gemälde des Russischen Reichs am Ende des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts*, vol. 7 (Leipzig: Johann Friedrich Hartknoch, 1803), pp. 254–55.

61 Iu. M. Lotman, Roman A. S. Pushkina *‘Evgenii Onegin’: Kommentarii* (Leningrad: Prosveshchenie, 1983), pp. 106–09; Cvetkovski, *Modernisierung durch Beschleunigung*, 109–10; Kationov, *Moskovsko-Sibirskii trakt* (2004), pp. 299–327.

awful; in the early eighteenth century they were largely non-existent. The first paved highways, or *chaussées*, did not appear in Russia until 1817; before that, apart from a few experiments, road building consisted of “choosing a direction, clearing a way and arranging temporary fords across rivers and marshy places”, using axes and saws.⁶² Though the labour involved could be colossal—one late seventeenth-century embassy from Moscow to Smolensk counted 533 such crossings, made out of logs—nature remained the master of these surfaces, which could be washed out or made impassable by flood and mud alike. That said, the same was true of Europe and the world at large in the eighteenth century, where (as one scholar has written) “most roads were little more than unmaintained mud tracks or bridlepaths”.⁶³ In such conditions, Ferdinand Braudel argues, differences in speed were dependent not on travelling surfaces, but on regular “services provided by other people”, food, shelter, labour, and above all draft animals chief among them.⁶⁴ Only in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries did combinations of new road-making technologies (such as McAdam’s famous method), horse breeding, and improved postal organisation begin to allow a noticeable breakthrough in speed, as compared to ancient times.⁶⁵

In an extensive archival analysis of the speeds attained by official transport in the Urals in the 1740s, the historian Dmitrii Redin has estimated that a courier travelling the system could reliably average fifty-five kilometres a day in Western Siberia (Tobolsk), and between fifty and seventy kilometres a day elsewhere. While short of the targets announced by official decrees, these averages correspond to similarly mountainous provincial regions in Europe, such as the Pyrenees, he claims.⁶⁶ Indeed, speeds of forty to fifty miles (or sixty to eighty kilometres) a day were typical for central Britain and much of Europe

62 Kudriavtsev, *Ocherki istorii dorozhnogo stroitel'stva*, vol. 1, p. 67, pp. 75–76, p. 80; Drobizhev, *Istoricheskaia geografiia*, pp. 251–57.

63 Simon Ville, *Transport and the Development of the European Economy, 1750–1918* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1990), p. 13.

64 Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th–18th Century* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), pp. 415–29.

65 See also Philip S. Bagwell, *The Transport Revolution* (London: Routledge, 1988); Theo Barker and Dorian Gerhold, *The Rise and Rise of Road Transport, 1700–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

66 Redin, *Administrativnye struktury*, pp. 363–87, pp. 585–90.

in the eighteenth century, as well as Rome two thousand years before.⁶⁷ In the central corridors between St Petersburg, Moscow, and Kazan, European observers from Herberstein (early sixteenth century) to Storch (early nineteenth century) were usually favourably impressed by the constant availability of horses—and with them, the speed and reliability of travel in Russia—even as they bemoaned the bumpy roads. (Winter was even better, when snow and ice created astonishingly fast roads for sleighs, “whose transport is agreeable and convenient” (*dont la voiture est douce et commode*), as Jean Struys rhapsodised about the Smolensk road in winter, in the late 1680s).⁶⁸ The greatest difference noted was the lack of private inns in Russia—forcing travellers to sleep and eat in the common rooms of relay courtyards, or their own wagons—and the voraciousness of summer mosquitoes.⁶⁹

None of this meant, of course, that Imperial Russian communications were up to the task Fick and other central planners set for them. As Redin observes, being able to achieve European speeds for horse travel did not shrink the size of a state that dwarfed its European contemporaries.⁷⁰ Though travel times between Moscow and St Petersburg slowly dropped across the eighteenth century, Tobolsk was still two months from Moscow even under ideal conditions, and on any given journey these could be disrupted by “capricious weather, the condition of the horses, and, in the end, the personal qualities of the courier”.⁷¹ Delivered by postmen selected from locally obligated people, correspondence could easily go astray at any point, creating mysteries not easily resolved from

67 Barker and Gerhold, *Rise and Rise*, pp. 26–27; Dorian Gerhold, *Carriers and Coachmasters: Trade and Travel before the Turnpikes* (Chichester, UK: Phillimore & Co., 2005); Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism*, p. 424; W. R. Mead, *An Historical Geography of Scandinavia* (London: Academic Press, 1981), p. 91; Silverstein, *Postal Systems*, p. 31, p. 191.

68 Jean Struys, *Les voyages de Jean Struys, en Moscovie, en Tartare, en Perse, aux Indes, et en plusieurs autres Païs étrangers*, vol. 1 (Lyon: C. Rey and L. Plaigniard, 1682), pp. 310–12

69 Sigizmund Gerbershtein, *Zapiski o Moskovii*, ed. A. L. Khoroshkevich, vol. 1 (Moskva: Pamiatniki istoricheskoi mysli, 2008), pp. 266–69; Friedrich Christian Weber, *The Present State of Russia* (London: Frank Cass & Co., 1968), pp. 115–16; Phillip Johann von Strahlenberg, *Historie der Reisen in Russland, Sibirien, und der Grossen Tartarey* (Leipzig, n.d.), pp. 183–85; John W. Randolph, ‘The Singing Coachman Or, The Road and Russia’s Ethnographic Invention in Early Modern Times’, *Journal of Early Modern History*, 11. 1–2 (February 2007), 33–61.

70 See Redin, pp. 385–87, pp. 585–90.

71 Redin, p. 382.

the centre. “Letters disappeared en route”, the historian A. N. Vigilev observes,

A relay-man might forget to give the bundle of letters to his comrade, might drive past the town, to which they were addressed. If there were no pouches in which to drive the mail, the relay headman, if he thought it necessary, might keep correspondence at the station during bad weather, and letters might stay there for a long time.⁷²

Although it achieved quite a lot by sustaining a workable system of relay communications across a vast early modern empire, the Russian posts of the eighteenth century could not coordinate the actions of a vast empire as fully as Russia’s rulers desired. It is doubtful that any animal-powered system could have.

By the 1760s, it was the spatial and social footprint of its postal system—more than its speed or technology—that distinguished Russia’s relay network from those of its European contemporaries. First there was the matter of network size and density, which made gigantic Russia seem suddenly small. By the middle of the eighteenth century, according to various modern estimates, Russia had between eleven and fifteen thousand kilometres of relay roads.⁷³ Using published itineraries, E. G. Istomina estimates this number rose to roughly seventeen thousand by the end of the century.⁷⁴ Yet, in 1776 France, whose overall territory was only a fraction of Russia’s, had a nearly equivalent 14,000 kilometres of relay roads (after which the French posts went on to experience a period of explosive growth).⁷⁵ More generally, by comparison with mail and transport systems throughout Europe, Russia’s postal system remained a thin and lacy structure, stretching in single lines across great distances to connect the empire’s “chief towns and cities”, even as the postal networks of

72 Vigilev, *Istoriia otechestvennoi pochty*, p. 261.

73 Cvetkovski, *Modernisierung durch Beschleunigung*, p. 108, n. 79.

74 See L. M. Marasimova, ‘Puti i sredstva soobshcheniia’, in *Ocherki russkoi kul'tury XVIII veka*, Part 1, ed. by B. A. Rybakov (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Moskovskogo universiteta, 1985), 270; E. G. Istomina, *Vodnye puti Rossii vo vtoroi polovine XVIII-nachale XIX veka* (Moscow: Nauka, 1982), 25–26.

75 Muriel Le Roux, ‘Expanding the Network of Postal Routes in France 1708–1833 (Histoire des réseaux postaux en Europe du XVIIIe au XXIe siècle)’, trans. by Nicolas Verdier and Anne Bretagnolle, *HAL archives-ouvertes.fr/Comite pour l'histoire de la Poste*, May 2007, p. 6, <https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00144669/document>

its smaller European contemporaries extended into the everyday life of hamlets and villages.⁷⁶ Somewhat more dense on Russia's Western frontiers — where the empire had many trading partners and interacted with other postal systems — the system of relay communications grew ever sparser East of the Moscow-Tula line.⁷⁷

Yet if the density of the Russian postal network was relatively low, its footprint in imperial society was both larger than this would suggest, and distinctively shaped. Instead of clinging close to the roads and towns the post served, the social supports anchoring Russia's relays stretched sporadically in various directions. This was because — in contrast to most of its contemporaries — Russia continued to rely on direct obligations on individual communities to support its posts. Most generally, in states throughout Europe, relay services were run as farmed monopolies. Local notables (such as the ubiquitous French *maître de poste*) contracted to provide for official communications in exchange for the right to run postal services for profit. These postal "entrepreneurs", as Daniel Roche has called them, hired their workers and horses from their own purses and conducted their relays as a business, on a local, regional, or even national scale.⁷⁸ This was, of course, the same general model that had been used to establish the first "foreign post" in Russia, in the mid-seventeenth century.

76 See Wolfgang Behringer, 'Communications Revolutions: A Historiographical Concept', *German History*, 24. 3 (1 July 2006), 333–74; Wolfgang Behringer, *Im Zeichen des Merkur: Reichspost und Kommunikationsrevolution in der Frühen Neuzeit* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003); Philip S. Bagwell, *The Transport Revolution* (London: Routledge, 1988); Barker and Gerhold, *Rise and Rise*.

77 See Istomina, *Vodnye puti*, 23.

78 Daniel Roche, *La culture équestre de l'Occident XVIe-XIXe siècle: L'ombre du cheval*, vol. 1 (n.p.: Fayard, 2008), p. 307. The Thurn-und-Taxis dynasty operated such a concession on an empire-wide scale, while in England not only mail and transport, but the actual construction of roads, was outsourced through the turnpike trusts. See Patrick Marchand, *Le maître de poste et le messenger, les transports publics en France au temps du cheval, 1700–1850* (Paris: Belin, 2006); Wolfgang Behringer, *Thurn und Taxis: Die Geschichte ihrer Post und ihrer Unternehmen* (Munich: Piper, 1990); Gerhold, *Carriers and Coachmasters*; Barker and Gerhold, *Rise and Rise*; Bagwell, *The Transport Revolution*; John Copeland, *Roads and Their Traffic 1750–1850* (New York: August M. Kelley, 1968); Magnus Linnarsson, 'Postal Service on a Lease Contract: The Privatization and Outsourcing of the Swedish Postal Service, 1662–1668', *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 37. 3 (2012), 296–316; Linnarsson, 'The Development of the Swedish Post Office, c. 1600–1721'.

Yet, during his reign, Peter repudiated this model in favour of the older imperial practice of relay obligation. As a result, the 574 stations that (by official count) comprised the Russian relay system in 1762 possessed a distinctive social footprint. They were connected to communities not simply through licenced markets, but through the reach of relay obligations.⁷⁹ And this reach varied wildly, as Russia's postal roads developed across the century, in some cases much faster than the structures of obligation that supported them. Even in Peter's time, it will be recalled, "relay suburbs" provided only a portion of the horses needed by the system, with serfs, tribute-paying Muslims, Ukrainian Cossacks, town magistracies and "district people" (*uezdnye liudi*), among others, providing the rest. In 1767, meanwhile, the Relay Chancery observed that shifting routes had resulted in a situation where it was not uncommon for communities "two or three hundred *versts* or more" away from a station to be obligated to supply it with horses and drivers.⁸⁰

Catherine II (r. 1762–96) took vigorous action to push Imperial Russian communications down to the district level. Inheriting the territorial order created under her predecessors, in the 1770s she radically renovated it, increasing the number, responsibilities, and local subdivisions of Russia's provinces; as in Peter's time, this implied an internal refinement of Russia's relay network.⁸¹ In 1782, Catherine ordered her provincial governors to draw up plans for creating three distinct levels of postal roads: 1) central arteries between Petersburg, Moscow, and the provinces; 2) roads between provincial capitals; and 3) roads from provincial capitals to the administrative centres of districts.⁸²

79 For count, see August Ludwig Schlözer, 'Vom Postwesen im Russischen Reiche', in *M. Johann Joseph Haigold's Beylagen zum Neuveränderten Russland*, vol. 1 (Riga and Miatou: Johann Friedrich Hartknoch, 1769), p. 303.

80 'Nakaz, otpravlenному iz Iamskoi kantseliarii v Moskvu, v stolitsu eia Imperatorskogo Velichestva, deputatu byvshemu v Iamskoi kantseliarii nadvornym sovetnikom, kotoryi nyne glavного kommissariata prokuror, gospodinu Nelidovu', in *Sbornik Imperatorskogo russkogo istoricheskogo obshchestva*, vol. 43 (Nelden, Liechtenstein: Kraus Reprint, 1971), p. 363.

81 On Catherine's provincial reforms in general, see Robert E. Jones, *Provincial Development in Russia: Catherine II and Jakob Sievers* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1984); A. B. Kamenskii, 'Administrativnoe upravlenie v Rossii XVIII v.', in *Administrativnye reformy v Rossii: istoriia i sovremennost'* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2006).

82 *PSZ* 1, no. 15323; this followed an order of the previous year to begin building district posts: *PSZ* 1, no. 15127.

Though tracking the process by which these plans were implemented is difficult, early nineteenth-century maps and centrally collected statistics both document the rapid local expansion of Russia's relays that followed.

Thus, in 1769, according to Schlözer, the empire's 574 stations harnessed 3,866 postal horses in their service; by 1775, according to Vasilii Ruban, there were 4,895 horses provided for the relays, with 1,417 of those (or about 29%) being located on the vital Petersburg-Moscow road. (Ruban also counts 101 relay routes by this time.)⁸³ By 1801, the Chief Postal Directory informed the Ministry of Internal Affairs that there were 3,222 relay stations in the empire, commanding 37,840 horses, a six-fold and nine-fold increase, respectively, in a little over two decades. Whereas in 1781 there had been 73 post offices in the empire—regional depots for the collection and circulation of letter and packet mail—by 1801 there were 450.⁸⁴ This growth continued into the next quarter of the nineteenth century, as Kelly O'Neill's digitisation of V. P. Piadyshev's 1827 *Geographical Atlas of the Russian Empire* has shown. By this count, there were 3,567 post stations in the empire (as well as 576 "post houses", concentrated largely in Finland and Ukraine).⁸⁵

Between 1775 and 1825, in other words, Russia's horse relay networks were placed on the path that would lead to their mid-nineteenth-century apogee. The network of 1854 is visible only in outline in the itineraries of the 1760s, but it exists in detail on the provincial postal maps of the first quarter of the nineteenth century (allowing, of course, for some subsequent growth).⁸⁶ By comparison with this development, other innovations in postal services during Catherine's reign seem minor. In 1781, a "heavy" post (for bulk official mail and larger parcels) was established twice a week between Petersburg and Moscow, alongside the

83 Schlözer, 'Vom Postwesen', p. 303; Ruban, *Dorozhnik*, pp. xi–xv, pp. 223–24.

84 Cvetkovski, *Modernisierung durch Beschleunigung*, p. 114. See also RGIA, coll. 1289, descr. 1, file 118, 1801 g. ('O soobshchenii Gosudarstvennomu sovetu svedenii ob'iasniaiushchikh ustroistvo pocht v Rossii'), fols. 37, 47v.

85 See 'Post Stations', *The Imperia Project*, <http://dighist.fas.harvard.edu/projects/imperia/document/676>

86 See, for example, *Karmannyi pochtovyi atlas vsei Rossiiskoi Imperii, razdelennoi na Gubernii s pokazaniem glavnykh pochtovykh dorog* (St Petersburg: Sobstvennyi Ego Imperatorskogo Velichestva Departament Kart, 1808).

established “light” post (for correspondence).⁸⁷ Deliveries continued to be added to the mail routes of major towns. In 1770, Procurator General Aleksandr Viazemskii designed a stagecoach system to run between St Petersburg and Narva. The first public coach in Russia, it was meant to carry up to six passengers with their luggage in a carriage drawn by four relay horses, with scheduled times of arrival and departure. Despite this Northern experiment, however, public coaching did not become common in Russia until the 1820s and 1830s, when private companies were licenced for this purpose.⁸⁸

Indeed, in retrospect, the most ambitious postal reform imagined in the Catherinean era failed outright. Both Viazemskii (in his plans for the Narva posts) and Prince Aleksandr Bezborodko (a favourite deeply involved in postal affairs in the 1780s) believed it might be possible to shift the support of the postal service onto some form of commercial- or tax-based footing. Catherine was sympathetic to these plans, and in 1784 issued a personal decree “On the Emancipation of the Residents of St Petersburg and Olonetsk Provinces from Postal Obligation”. According to this plan, the “relay suburbs” in these regions were disbanded, and a tax was to be imposed on the whole provincial population. With this money, the plan was to hire relay servitors and organise relay stations directly from the treasury.⁸⁹

In the mid-1790s, however, Nikolai Arkharov, Governor-General of St Petersburg, pronounced this reform unworkable. In a memorandum, he urged Paul I to reorganise the “relay suburbs”, and reinstate relay obligation more generally as the foundation of the province’s postal service. Paul approved this proposal, and went even further. In 1798, in a general decree on the proper organisation of the posts, Paul instructed his governors that support of the posts was a general “societal obligation” (*obshchestvennaia povinnost’*), to be born as needed by communities under their authority, whenever “relay suburbs” were not available.⁹⁰ The effect was to urge governors to freely employ relay

87 PSZ 1, no. 15330.

88 Alexandra Bekasova, “The Making of Passengers in the Russian Empire: Coach-Transport Companies, Guidebooks, and National Identity in Russia, 1820–1860”, in *Russia in Motion*, ed. by Randolph and Avrutin, pp. 199–217.

89 PSZ 1, no. 16012; see also similar provisions in Viazemskii’s plans for the Narva post.

90 PSZ 1, no. 17582; PSZ 1, no. 17721; PSZ 1, no. 17744.

obligations as they continued to extend imperial communications down to the district level.⁹¹

In point of fact, to meet the demands posed by Catherine's order to expand the network, they had already been doing so. The population of the "relay suburbs" had stagnated in the second half of the eighteenth century, growing by a mere 26% even as the demands made of them, in terms of stations and horses served, grew by leaps and bounds, 461% and 673% respectively.⁹² As a result, when asked in 1801 to describe how relays were supported in the provinces, Russia's governors painted a spectacularly mixed picture. In Kaluga, local *iamshchiki* provided 48 horses, the rest of the population 184; in Tambov, *iamshchiki* drove 72 horses along 248 *versts* of roads, while "local district residents" maintained nearly 2,000 additional horses along 1,715 *versts* of roads (!). In Perm, 9,970 "souls" in towns were somehow made to pay for 19 horses; Pskov taxed merchants at a rate of 1 horse for every 200 "souls", and townspeople at a rate of 1 horse for every 337. The only pattern that emerges from this detailed report on relay obligations is that the maintenance of the relays was rarely confined to the estate of *iamshchiki*. Instead, as the system developed, it was spilling over into ever-broader categories of the population, often assuming the character of a local or even province-wide tax, whereby specific communities would pool resources to send a horse and driver to fulfill their obligation.⁹³ Ever more ubiquitous, the society of the road was less and less a caste, and more and more a finely differentiated web obligating variable contributions from a range of Russian societies, and staffed using hired labour.

As an evolving spectacle in daily life, this broad performance of relay duty attracted concentrated attention, from politics, commerce, and art

91 The central Relay Chancery was eliminated in 1781, and administrative power over local relay obligations transferred to the provincial governors: see *PSZ1*, no. 15178.

92 *Arkhiv Gosudarstvennogo soveta*, vol. 3, pt. 2, p. 874. For "soul" counts of *iamshchiki*, see See V. M. Kabuzan and N. M. Shepukova, 'Tabel' Pervoi Revizii Narodonaseleniia Rossii (1718–27)', *Istoricheskii arkhiv*, 3 (June 1959), 129, 165, as well as the overall population calculation made by Ia. E. Vodarskii, *Naselenie Rossii v kontse XVII-nachale XVIII veka (chislennost', soslovno-klassovyi sostav, razmeshchenie)* (Moscow, 1977), Table 44, p. 192; *Arkhiv Gosudarstvennogo soveta*, vol. 3, pt. 2, p. 874; 'Nakaz iz Iamskoi Kantseliarii', p. 363.

93 'O soobshchenii', fols. 99v., 104b, 188, 153, 158–158ob, 162–162v. The figures for Smolensk, for example, seem to line up exactly with the census count of the population as a whole, but elsewhere the pattern is more local, see fols. 88–97v.

alike. On the one hand, between 1802 and 1825, the social conditions underlying the posts attracted the attention of no fewer than five high-level government committees, most of which focussed on the question of whether and how to end the system of relay obligation.⁹⁴ Some felt that Russia's posts would never operate efficiently and equitably until they stood on a more universal footing: either a fully commercial system that placed the costs on the users of the post (including the government), or a nationalised one, where all of Russia's subjects, through a common, empire-wide tax, subsidised this public good. Others, including Tsar Alexander I, regretted the inequitable distribution of postal obligations, but nonetheless believed in sustaining, and perhaps even expanding, the practice of organising communities specially obligated to serve the roads (the network of *iamskie slobody*).⁹⁵

Nicholas I finally cut the Gordian knot in the late 1830s. Upset by what he perceived to be the chronic instability of relay stations on the Moscow-Petersburg highway, he was impressed by stations on the Dünaburg road, which connected Smolensk to Riga. Part of partitioned Poland, these routes had been organised on a commercial basis for decades, according to a project devised in the 1770s. After four years of planning, Nicholas ordered the transition of Russia's system onto much the same foundation, in 1843. From then on a contract system would fund Russia's postal stations, with prospective operators agreeing to run the relays on a for profit basis on terms set by the state. Using hired rather than obligated workers, such commercial posts gradually replaced relay duty as the basis of postal communications in the empire. Nicholas also ordered his Minister of State Domains, Pavel Kisilev, to oversee the conversion of Russia's special estate of *iamshchiki* into the ordinary status of state peasants.⁹⁶

This process took decades. In his autobiographical story 'The Sovereign's Coachmen', Vladimir Korolenko would recall seeing remnants of the old relay order in the Siberia of the 1880s, left behind (as

94 This complex official history is summarised in 'Zhurnal i polozhenie komiteta o novom ustroistve pochtovoi gon'by mezhdou stolits', RGIA, coll. 1289, descr. 1, file 621, fols. 16–26v., from the early 1840s. See also Bunina *et al.*, *Materialy po istorii sviazi*.

95 See the discussion in *Arkhiv Gosudarstvennogo Soveta*, 3, part 2, pp. 843–96.

96 'Zhurnal i polozhenie', fol. 2v., 65–102, 135. The invention of the postal system of partitioned Poland dates to the 1770s, see *PSZ* 1, no. 13911.

he put it) like a primordial glacier in a deep valley.⁹⁷ Meanwhile, as its social underpinnings were being transformed, the imperial postal system became the object of a growing consumer and artistic cult, providing a set of objects and symbols imperial subjects could use to perform and represent their relationship to Russia. Already in the early nineteenth century, for example, merchants and rich peasants eagerly bought official-style “relay bells” (*iamskie kolokol'chiki*) to decorate their own troikas, despite official decrees forbidding the practice.⁹⁸ In the 1820s, Russia’s first lithographers created quick-selling images of dashing mail troikas, even as poets and composers wrote widely popular songs about them.⁹⁹ In this way, the culture of relay obligation in the Russian Empire not only served to shuttle people and things across points in space, but also helped generate cultural commonplaces to populate and unite the spaces between them.

97 V. G. Korolenko, “Gosudarevy iamshchiki”, in *Sobranie sochinenii*, ed. by S. V. Korolenko and N. V. Korolenko-Liakhovich, vol. 1 (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1953), pp. 414–20.

98 *Lit’ v Kasimove: katalog-spravochnik duzhnykh i podsheinykh kolokol'chikov Kasimovskogo kolokololiteinogo tsentra XIX-nachala XX v.*, ed. by A. A. Glushetskii (n.p.: Collector’s Book, 2005); A. Glushetskii, *Rossii bronzovoe slovo: o chem govorit duzhnyi kolokol'chik* (Moscow: Tsentr delovoi informatsii ezhenedel’nika “Ekonomika i zhizn’”, 2007), p. 25.

99 A. F. Korostin, *Ruskaia litografiia XIX veka* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo “Iskusstvo”, 1953), pp. 8–14, 25–26; Thomas P. Hodge, *A Double Garland: Poetry and Art-Song in Early-Nineteenth-Century Russia* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2000), pp. 81, 143–44; L. I. Sazonova, ‘Literaturnaia rodoslovnaia gogolevskoi ptitsy-troiiki’, *Izvestiia Akademii Nauk, Seriya literatury i iazyka*, 59. 2 (2000), 23–30.

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