
BORDERLANDS

**“SOMETIMES MARTHA ATTACKED RURAL SETTLEMENTS AND GENTRY ESTATES:” FROM THE HISTORY OF THE NOBLE BANDITRY IN THE XVIII – FIRST HALF OF THE XIX CENTURIES
(Based on Belgorod and Kursk regional materials)**

V. A. Shapovalov
Belgorod National
Research University

В. А. Шаповалов
Белгородский государственный
национальный исследовательский
университет

Abstract. The author considers the banditry of Martha Durova, a prominent landowner in Putivl' *uezd*, Sevsk province, Belgorod *guberniia*, in the context of social relations in the Russian-Ukrainian borderlands in the eighteenth through the first half of the nineteenth century. The government ultimately sent military units to the “*porubezhny kraj*” to secure her arrest. While noble banditry was certainly not unique to Belgorod and Kursk provinces, no other regions of Russia recorded violent, bloody noble banditry and an accompanying governmental military response on a similarly large scale during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The author identifies the tradition of “*vol'nitsa*” (brigands) in the Russian-Ukrainian borderlands, as well as the weakness and corruption of the Crown authorities in the former southwestern borderlands of the Russian state, as the major factors that shaped the Durova incident.

Keywords: Russian-Ukrainian borderlands, Martha Durova, proprietor, banditry, Belgorod province, eighteenth century, first half of the nineteenth century.

E-mail: Shapovalov[at]bsu.edu.ru

Copyright: © 2014 Shapovalov. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

**«ИНОГДА МАРФА НАПАДАЛА НА СЕЛЕНИЯ
И НА ПОМЕЩИЧЬИ УСАДЬБЫ»:
ИЗ ИСТОРИИ ДВОРЯНСКОГО РАЗБОЯ
XVIII – ПЕРВОЙ ПОЛОВИНЫ XIX ВВ.
(на материалах Белгородской и Курской губерний)**

Аннотация. Автор рассматривает разбойную деятельность Марфы Дуровой, крупной помещицы Путивльского уезда Севской провинции Белгородской губернии, в контексте специфики социальных отношений в русско-украинском порубежье в XVIII веке. Для ареста помещицы правительство было вынуждено даже специально направить в «порубежный край» воинские части. Безусловно, дворянский разбой не был уникальным явлением, характерным для Белгородской и Курской губерний, однако упоминаний о масштабах, жесткости, кровопролитности дворянских разбоев, сборов против них многотысячных ополчений и воинских частей в XVIII – первой половине XIX веков больше не встречается нигде, кроме, как в отношении данных регионов. Вероятно, здесь сыграли большую роль традиции вольницы русско-украинского порубежья, слабость и продажность коронных властей на бывших юго-западных окраинах российского государства.

Ключевые слова: русско-украинское порубежье, Марфа Дурова, помещица, разбой, Белгородская губерния, XVIII век, первая половина XIX века.

When family income was not connected with economic activity, but rather with banditry, landed gentry relations often reflected the traditions of the *vol'nitsa* of freemen and outlaws on the Russian-Ukrainian border. Regarding this connection, N. I. Kostomarov remarks: "People prosecuted by the law in one place often found shelter and rescue in another. As a result, the border between the Great Russian Ukrainian lands and Little Russian lands witnessed social interactions that were nonexistent or rare in the heartland. The Ukrainian lands of the Muscovite state adjacent to the Hetmanate's borders had long been the stage for willfulness by local landowners, who exploited their location far from the legal center as an opportunity to conceal their actions outside the Hetmanate. Records from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries contain numerous petitions regarding the border gentry's willfulness. There still exist the noble surnames mentioned in these petitions and subsequent investigations. Such was the Durova surname. Legend has preserved the memory of Martha Durova as a famous outlaw" (Kostomarov 1882, 6).

Martha Durova was a prominent landowner in Putivl' *uezd*, Sevska province, Belgorod *guberniia* during the reign of Anna Ioannovna. A

widow, she did not burden herself with legal economic activity, but rather engaged in banditry. This lifestyle was only possible under the weak local Crown administration, and in the context of traditions that psychologically freed the landowner from moral control (Nartova-Bochaver 2001, 57):

Riding a horse in the manner of men, with a gun slung over her shoulder, a handgun in her pocket, and a sword at her side, she led her band, followed by men in carts to gather the plunder. She did not order her peasants to sow seeds and harvest crops. Instead she told them that they did not have to toil and sweat in the hot sun. They could get everything for nothing, prepared by other people's labor. In July and August, Martha strode among her slaves, ordering them to collect and deliver the newly harvested grains to her *volost*, and to raise the haystacks. The same was done as they encountered grazing herds of cattle and swine and flocks of sheep. At once the landlady ordered her slaves to drive them onto her lands and then share them with her *muzhiks* (Kostomarov 1882, 7).

The systematic robberies of Martha Durova could not fail to be noticed by the Crown authorities; most likely she had paid them off. Further, the characterization of such campaigns in the Russian-Ukrainian borderlands during this period as somehow normalized due to a long border tradition cannot be fully rejected. Otherwise, it is difficult to explain the impunity of Martha when she attacked whole settlements and country estates, demanded tribute, "then made the victims kiss an icon and take an oath not to prosecute her for plunder. If not, she threatened to come again and bring them to ruin or set their lands on fire" (Kostomarov 1882, 7). On the other hand, the systematic character of "landowners' warfare" within one uezd supports this version:

Beyond Martha Durova, Putivl uezd had a reputation for similar bold deeds of willfulness on the part of the other noble families, among whom the Stremoukhovs and the Voropanovs have remained in people's memory. These noble bandits did not always act in concert, but rather opposed one another, in rivalries that ultimately led to feuds. On one occasion, a bandit and his band (Voropanov, it seems) attacked Martha Durova's household. A violent, bloody scuffle resulted. Martha was defeated. Her estate was reduced to ashes. Some of her people were beaten; others ran away. The entire settlement burned down. The owner herself, along with her young sons, barely escaped unscathed, having hidden in a swamp. Once the enemies left, Martha gathered her scattered servants and, before starting restoration of the destroyed homes, she attacked her rival, burned his estate to the ground, and killed him with her own hands. Her servants killed many

muzhiks who had attacked Martha Durova's household and village (Kostomarov 1882, 8).

This incident reads more like the description of a military operation by two opposing armed forces than a clarification of relations between two landowners. The murder of one of them, the death of a large number of peasants, the burning of villages and estates, and the absence of punishment of the victor by the regional Crown administration speaks to how authorities distanced themselves from "landed gentry fights." Throughout the century, popular legends preserved the memories of the local bandits' exploits in Kursk province. Such a long historical memory could only function if it was based on mass, resonant events that encompassed much of the region's population. Take, for example, "The Historical and Geographic Guide to Kursk Province, from the Orel border to Khar'kov, through 241.5 versts," composed by the official V. N. Levashev at the initiative of Kursk governor M. N. Murav'ev. This document reached Tsarevich Alexander Nikolaevich during his famous journey around the country in 1837. The section entitled, "Station Eleven: Twenty-nine versts from Belgorod to Chermoshnaia," specially states:

At verst sixteen, past twelve mounds extending for six versts past the road, lies the village Chausovka. And to the left there is a place called Storozhi because, according to legend, some eighty years ago pickets stood here to defend against the robberies of Kudeiar, who dwelt with a huge band in these parts and had many accomplices who hid in the dense forests of Kursk province at that time. Nearby, steep mountains form one solid mass, pitted with deep ravines. Their numerous peaks tower over one another for seven *versts* to the east of the northern Don River, scarcely seen between the mountain gaps adjoining one deep ditch. Over the river a valley opens up, surrounded by mountains and forest.

The neighboring peasants say that despite the pickets, there were constant murders in the old days, and bandits' gangs increased steadily such that the authorities had to assemble many thousands of settlers from Kursk and its neighboring provinces to exterminate the gang. This call was known then as "Klich" (from *klikat`* - to call)... Kudeiar escaped to parts unknown, but his gang, who had dwelt near the village of Tolokonnoe twelve versts away from Storozhi and in other places of Belgorod, Fatezh, and Kursk uezds along the rivers of Svopa and Sem, disappeared (Levashev 2010 [1837], 112).

V. N. Levashev notes that to cope with huge gangs of bandits in the 1750s provincial authorities had to assemble voluntary military forces numbering in the many thousands. Given the extent of banditry

in this period, local authorities probably did not always have the time and energy to deal with more minor banditry.

It should be noted that local landed gentry understood such “exploits” as compatible with Christian virtues, and they considered themselves sincere members of the Orthodox Church.

Regarding Martha Durova, N. I. Kostomarov emphasizes:

This woman was characterized by her outward piety. She observed church fasts, never missed services on Sundays and holidays, zealously contributed to God’s church, was very generous to all honest clergy, and paid special attention to the church in Kozach’ia Sloboda. She would visit the priest in Kozach’ia Sloboda prior to an assault. She would ask for a prayer service and for God to give her success in her venture. “Listen, Father,” she would say to the priest, “if we have luck we will bring you a present for it means you have prayed to God for our success. If we have no luck, then, sorry, we will beat you (Kostomarov 1882, 8–9).

As a result, the government had to send military divisions to the “border region.” Martha Durova and her closest associates were arrested, prosecuted, and sent to Siberia.

The absence of administrative control, resultant willfulness, and impunity of Belgorod provincial landlords was caused in no small part by large-scale bribery, embezzlement of state property, and other illegal actions of the local Crown authorities (Penskaia and Penskoii 2010, 71–79):

Despite the short period of its existence, this province acquired notoriety throughout Russia for the grandiose investigations of their political leaders’ and clerks’ criminal actions. These criminal actions included bribery, extortion, and illegal requisitions. Catherine II, having received information about lawlessness in Belgorod province, established a special commission under the chairmanship of Major Shcherbinin to investigate. This commission uncovered bribery by thirty-nine bureaucrats, who were prosecuted and sentenced by the ruling Senate. On November 11, 1766, the empress confirmed the sentence, with minor modifications. Governor and Privy Councilor Saltykov was the most prominent of these Belgorod grafters and “bribe-takers” (Tankov 1888, 240).

An additional important factor deserves mention: the psychological permissiveness of Kursk landowners who engaged in banditry. As serf owners, many landowners lost a sense of human empathy, seeing in their serfs only “christened property.” In the context of a lack of supervision on the part of authorities, even a sense of self could atrophy, no longer controlled by anybody or anything except personal ambitions and claims (Presniakov 2012, 258; Tarasov 2011, 6–7). Even the murder

of a man who is one's social equal and the theft of his property did not represent a definite barrier for some landowners, as is demonstrated by the "exploits" of Martha Durova, Kudeiar, the Voropanovs, Stremoukhovs, and many others.

The tradition of gentry banditry in Kursk province shifted from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century. In any case, contemporaries suggest it was a very widespread phenomenon in the prereform era, although its scope shrunk somewhat over this period.

R. Markov, the landowner of Shchigrovskii uezd, Kursk province, recollects the conflict of his grandfather, the prominent landowner Alexander Andreevich, with his neighbor A. G. Osorgin (the surname has been changed by the author – V. Sh.):

There occurred a serious incident on the grandfather's birthday. Quite unexpectedly, Alexander Andreevich quarreled with his next-door neighbor A. G. Osorgin, who created a panic among the people of the uezd. He was a terrible man, linked to many violent crimes in different parts of the uezd. Local rumors implicated him in robberies, burglaries, arson, and numerous murders...

Having drunk a bit, Osorgin was counting out the money he had lost to the grandfather on his birthday, and put down several counterfeit coins Alexander Andreevich lost his temper and said he did not keep such money, and did not advise anybody to do so. In short, there was a stormy scene, at the end of which Osorgin vowed to exact a terrible vengeance on the grandfather (Markov 1891, 249–250).

Taking into account that R. Markov wrote his recollections about his grandfather in 1891, the given event is likely to have occurred between the late 1830s and the early 1840s. It bears mention that the author references the widespread robbery and murder in the uezd and connects these events to one landowner's name. Further, Markov relates how Osorgin and his serfs prepared a campaign against the grandfather's estate, the main aim of which was to take away "the bread ... in Markov's barn." The preparation itself demonstrates the deliberation involved in such campaigns. It was known in advance that most of Markov's muzhiks had left for the town of Sevsk to get "the red forest." Having prepared the carts and armed themselves with cudgels, pitchforks, and axes, Osorgin's army started the campaign (Markov 1891, 250–254).

Considering his previous similar experience, Alexander Andreevich paid special attention to recruiting the estate watchmen who constituted his "guards:"

The guards of the estate patrolled the vast yard all night, their bast shoes and cudgels scraping the snow. These were first-class strong

and clever men.... The guards were loyal to their master and dangerous to the outlaws. These men had few equals in strength, agility in a fight, keen eyesight, and acute hearing. It was difficult and dangerous to go past such guards.... The guards of Markov the landowner were widely known in the area (Markov 1891, 251).

In short, the strongest and cleverest men on Markov's estate were assigned to the guards, evidence of the estate's constant readiness to repulse "thieves' mischief" or banditry.

At night, notes the author, six of Markov's guards met Osorgin's entire army, who began reloading the bread from Markov's barn onto their carts. Further, he gives the description of the fight:

And a terrible fight began. Cudgels, pitchforks, scythes, fists were all used. Then followed a roar, cries, and bloodcurdling moans. Numerical superiority gave the bandits the upper hand, although they were certainly weaker and less skillful than the guards (Markov 1891, 255).

According to the recollections, at this point, returning muzhiks from the village hurried to help Markov's guards:

"Destroy, destroy!," cried Osorgin, running among his men. "We are winning...." All of a sudden, Osorgin yelled, "Retreat, retreat!," struggling as he waved his hunting spear at the men who had come to his aid. "Cart away the bread, quickly! Drive the horses!," he screamed at the top of his lungs.

However, none of the loaded carts would budge. Old Seliverst, experienced in such occasions, managed to cut one tug in each horse's collar, and all the saddle girths under the din of the battle. Osorgin himself barely escaped by climbing into the empty sleighs.... Most of his string of carts were abandoned to the grandfather, who in turn gave them to his men (Markov 1891, 256).

The description of this "battle" leads to certain conclusions. The phrase "old Seliverst, experienced in such occasions," affirms the sense of a rooted tradition of Kursk landowners using serf contingents to settle scores among themselves. The victor acquired his enemy's abandoned property "on the field of battle." The landowners led such "campaigns" personally. The question of resolving conflict through the courts was apparently beyond the legal notions of much of the local gentry. Noble origin and gentry honor demanded personal participation in the resolution of conflict. It was a kind of duel, but with the help of their serfs' cudgels and axes.

These actions assumed the connivance or perhaps understanding of Crown authorities, whose ranks included the gentry. Neither side

rejected bribes. At the same time, it should be noted that the landowners' internecine wars in Belgorod province in the eighteenth century had more tragic, bloody consequences than in the first half of the nineteenth century in Kursk province.

In order to provide for their serfs and house servants, some landowners forced their peasants to engage in banditry, while not losing sight of their own "economic" interests. The landowner did not take to the highway himself, but initiated and controlled his or her peasants' brigandage:

To this day people in Shchigrovskii uezd say, "Tut-tut, village of Viazovoe. Those who enter you, raise a howl!" It should be noted that even now people call part of this village in the old-fashioned way, "Ponyri" ("in the burrows").

The nickname unintentionally conjures up a time when the whole village of unhappy peasants belonging to the landowner Alymova lived in this neighborhood in burrows ("po noram"), that is not in the log huts, but in wet dugouts. Her first husband Sychev trained them as well as all his house serfs in real brigandage. However, one should add here that when she was married to her second husband Alymov and even after his death, Alexandra Ezot'evna Alymova herself sent her people not once "to feed by shaft bow," not only in their own community, but farther, so to speak, "to the distant fields" (Markov 1899, 538-539).

Alexandra Ezot'evna's brigandage took place in the 1820s. She became the true successor of Martha Durova, but she did not personally lead her army on campaigns.

This paper does not affirm the unique nature of the phenomenon of gentry banditry nor of landowners' internecine wars in Belgorod and Kursk provinces in the Russian-Ukrainian borderlands. The settling of scores between landowners via their own serfs was widely practiced in the other Russian provinces.

For example, S. T. Slavutinskii, born in the village of Gaivoron, Kursk province, recalled his grandfather from the village of Mikhevo, Egor'evskii uezd, Riazan' province, in the latter half of the eighteenth century. He noted in particular:

My grandfather Nikolai Mikhailovich P-v was combative and successful in protecting his water mill in Mikhevo from the wicked and utterly cruel female landowner from the village of Mikshevo, whose surname I no longer remember. It is remarkable that the fight was not in the form of the barratry and red tape litigation, but rather in a purely medieval fashion: at the mill dam there were frequent violent fights between Mikheev's and Mikshevo's men, which were always led personally by grandfather and his dashing neighbor (Slavutinskii 1880, 216-217).

Nevertheless, only in Belgorod and Kursk provinces was mention made of wide-scale, cruel, and bloody gentry banditry, and of many-thousand voluntary military forces and regiments called against them in the eighteenth through the first half of the nineteenth century. The traditions of freemen and outlaws in the Russian-Ukrainian borderlands is likely the primary explanatory factor, along with the weakness and venality of the Crown authorities in the former southwestern outlying districts of the Russian state. However, an attempt to draw parallels with Dubrovskii (a character from Pushkin's novel) would be ill-advised, as the awareness of the personal nobility among Kursk gentry was rather perverted and self-interested. The Kursk gentry's women outlaws stand out in the historical record for their special cruelty and impudence.

Translated from Russian by Irina O. Eshchenko and Emily B. Baran

REFERENCES

1. Kostomarov, N. I. 1882. "Kazach'ia Dubrova, inache Kazach'ia sloboda ili Kazach'ia [The Cossack *Dubrova*, Otherwise the Cossack Settlement or the *Kazach'ia*]." *Russkaia starina [The Russian Old Time]* 33: 1–10.
2. Levashev, V. N., comp. 2010 [1837]. *Istoricheskii i geograficheskii putevoditel' po Kurskoi gubernii ot orlovskoi granitsy do khar'kovskoi na 241 ½ verst [The Historical and Geographic Guide to Kursk Province, from the Orel Border to Khar'kov, through 241.5 Versts]*. Comp. in 1837. Sankt-Petersburg: Russian National Library.
3. Markov, R. 1891. "Nedavniaia starina. (Otryvki iz semeinoi khroniki) [Recent Past. (Fragments from the Family Chronicle)]." *Istoricheskii vestnik [The Historical Herald]* 45: 240–262.
4. Markov, R. 1899. "Nedavniaia starina [Recent Past]." *Istoricheskii vestnik [The Historical Herald]* 78: 538–544.
5. Nartova-Bochaver, S. 2001. *Psikhologiiia lichnosti i mezhlichnostnykh otnoshenii [The Psychology of Personality and Interpersonal Relations]*. Moscow: EKSMO-Press publ.
6. Penskaia, T. M., and V. V. Penskoii. 2010. *Ocherki istorii Belgorodchiny v XVIII v. [Essays on the History of Belgorod region in the Eighteenth Century]*. Belgorod: Politerra publ.
7. Presniakov, A. E. 2012 [1911]. "Dvorianskii i krest'ianskii vopros v nakazakh [The Nobility and Peasantry Question in Directives]." In *Velikaia reforma. Russkoe obshchestvo i krest'ianskii vopros v proshlom i nastoiashchem [The Great Reform. Russian Society and the Peasantry Question in the Past and Present]*. vol. I. Moscow: I.D. Sytin publ.
8. Tankov, A. 1888. "K istorii vziatochnichestva [On the History of Bribery]." *Istoricheskii vestnik [The Historical Herald]* 34: 240–245.
9. Tarasov, B. Iu. 2011. *Rossiiia krepostnaia [The Russia of Serfdom]*. Moscow: Veche publ.
10. Slavutinskii, S. 1880. "Rodnye mesta. Iz otryvochnykh vospominanii [Native Places. From Fragmented Memories]." *Russkii vestnik [The Russian Herald]* 147: 198–240.