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Obshchina and *Mir*

The words *obshchina* and *mir* should be familiar to all students of nineteenth-century Russia. Yet most Russian historians would probably be hard pressed to distinguish properly between the two terms. Current scholarship offers scant help regarding precise definitions and usages of these nouns. Semantic as well as historical questions are raised by their use, and the semantic questions are compounded by the fact that both Russian words are usually translated into English as “commune.” Each of these words does have its own history and a meaning which separates it from its counterpart, however, and this article attempts to eliminate some of the confusion surrounding the use of the two terms.

No completely satisfactory definitions of *obshchina* and *mir* now exist, and it is unlikely that any will appear in the future. The term *obshchina* has seemingly had no precise meaning from the time of its earliest usage in connection with Russian peasant life. Furthermore, both words have been made to do double and even triple duty. Like the labels “conservative” and “liberal” today, the Russian words have come to mean different things to different people. The terms have no one “correct” or universally acknowledged meaning, but this is not to say that the various meanings are necessarily irreconcilable or that one must despair of distinguishing between them.

The following are my own tentative definitions of *obshchina* and *mir* as used by nonpeasants in Russia from about 1861 to 1917.¹ *Mir* was a generic name for an organization of village-based peasants. It corresponds closely to the official term *sel'skoe obshchestvo* which appears in most nineteenth-century Russian peasant legislation. A second meaning of *mir* was the assembly of peasant householders which met to render decisions (*prigovory*) concerning a variety of *mir* affairs. Physically, a *mir* in the first sense might (and usually did) coincide with one particular settlement or village; alternatively, it might comprise a part of a village or even be composed of more than one village. In Robert Redfield's phrase, the *mir* was a “little community”—the administrative, judicial, economic, fiscal, and social unit most immediate to the peasant after his family and household. The *mir* was the lowest link in a chain of authorities which extended from the individual peasant to the highest levels of state control.

1. The restriction to nonpeasants will become clear in the following sections. “Russia” throughout this article refers basically to Great Russia.

When not used as a synonym for *mir*, as defined above, the word *obshchina* had two further meanings: (1) in narrow, concrete terms, an *obshchina* was a landholding group of peasants, a specific type of *mir*, or the embodiment of part of a *mir*; and (2) in loose usage, *obshchina* connoted a more or less idealized peasant community characterized by egalitarianism, a true Christian spirit, or other attributes (which will be discussed below). In the first sense, an *obshchina* was a group of peasants which collectively held an expanse of land, a part of which (usually only the plowland) could be redistributed among themselves and for which they shared certain fiscal responsibilities. Once divided up (repartitioned) the arable was farmed individually by the separate households. An *obshchina* thus coincided with some aspects of a *mir* but did not encompass all of the *mir*'s functions. The land of an *obshchina* either coincided with that of a *mir* or comprised a part of *mir* holdings. Every *obshchina* was perforce related to a *mir* (or more than one *mir*). But not every *mir* was connected with an *obshchina*, because some peasants held their land in hereditary household tenure and did not redistribute it.

Both Western and Soviet scholars have had difficulty in defining the two terms. The most common tendency has been to equate the two or to use them more or less interchangeably. For example, the Soviet *Dictionary of Contemporary Russian Literary Language* offers as one definition of *mir*: *sel'skaia obshchina*.² Another common problem has been the unwarranted imputation of certain features to the *mir* or *obshchina*. The late Lazar Volin implied that every *mir* exhibited communal land tenure and a repartitional system.³ The Soviet dictionary states flatly that the *obshchina* had compulsory common land use⁴ (at most this was the case with only a part of an *obshchina*'s land).

Better explanations of the two terms are available, but tend to be sketchy and incomplete. Useful short statements about the *obshchina* and *mir* can be found in recent works by Francis Watters and Donald Male.⁵ Extended dis-

2. F. P. Filin et al., eds., *Slovar' sovremennogo russkogo literaturnogo iazyka*, s.v. *mir*. Cf. Lazar Volin, *A Century of Russian Agriculture* (Cambridge, Mass., 1970), pp. 54 and 585, n. 11); Jerome Blum, *Lord and Peasant in Russia from the Ninth to the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Atheneum, 1964), p. 253; Teodor Shanin, *The Awkward Class* (Oxford, 1972), pp. 33 and 239; and Petr Zaionchkovskii, *Otmena krepostnogo prava v Rossii*, 3rd rev. and enl. ed. (Moscow, 1968), pp. 126 and 129, where *mir* = *sel'skoe obshchestvo* = *obshchina*.

3. Volin, *Century*, p. 77. Cf. his description of the *mir* on pp. 78–79. It should be noted here, in connection with the word "tenure" in the text, that Russian has two words similar in meaning to the English concept of ownership. In this article, *vladenie* will always be translated as "tenure," "holding," or "possession"; *sobstvennost'* will be "property" or "ownership." Between roughly 1700 and 1861 almost no peasants owned their own land in Great Russia; they held state or landlord (*pomeshchik*) land.

4. Filin et al., eds., *Slovar'*, s.v. *obshchina*.

5. Francis M. Watters, "The Peasant and the Village Commune," in *The Peasant in Nineteenth-Century Russia*, ed. Wayne S. Vucinich (Stanford, 1968), pp. 134–35; D. J. Male, *Russian Peasant Organisation before Collectivisation* (Cambridge, 1971), p. 220.

cussions of peasant village organization are in Geroid Robinson's classic *Rural Russia Under the Old Regime* and in the editors' notes to the English translation of V. I. Gurko's memoirs.⁶ These accounts are too long to be quoted here but the reader would do well to consult them. However, with the exception of Male (and he only briefly), none of these accounts addresses directly the question of the differences between a *mir* and an *obshchina*.

Two of the best succinct descriptions of the peasant institutions examined here are those of Sergei Pushkarev. His dictionary of historical terms contains the following entries (both partial):

mir, -ry. In the imperial period, peasant communities that had the function of regulating their own internal affairs (under supervision of the manorial administration—in serf villages before 1861—or of state officials). The *mir* preserved order in the village, regulated the use of communal arable lands and pastures, and until 1903 was collectively responsible for paying government taxes (see OBSHCHESTVO SEL'SKOE and OBSHCHINA).

obshchina, krest'ianskaia pozemel'naiia obshchina. Peasant commune or community, predominantly in Great Russia. The distinctive characteristic of this organization was periodic redistribution and equalization of the arable lands among households, according to the number of male souls, or working hands, or eaters in each of them. After the distribution of plowlands each household managed its affairs on its own. This system of periodic redistribution of holdings became widespread in the 18th, and esp. in the 19th, centuries.⁷

The definitions differ, even if it remains unclear what the exact nature of each of these "peasant communities" was and what in fact distinguished them.

Perhaps the most informed attempt to sort out these two terms is that of the German scholar Carsten Goehrke. In his excellent monograph on theories of the *mir*'s origins and development, Goehrke has an introductory section which discusses both what a *mir* was and Russian *obshchina* terminology. He states that *mir* referred to any and all of the following: a peasant village group as the "cooperative" owner of communal land property; the assembly of village householders; a peasant community ("the smallest cell of the state's administration"); and, most important, the entire system of a peasant community with communal property and repartitional land tenure. *Obshchina*, according to Goehrke, originally (in the 1830s and 1840s) meant a reparti-

6. Geroid T. Robinson, *Rural Russia Under the Old Regime* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), pp. 67–68, 70–71; J. E. Wallace Sterling, Xenia Joukoff Eudin, and H. H. Fisher, eds., notes to *Features and Figures of the Past*, by V. I. Gurko (Stanford, 1939), pp. 595–97.

7. Sergei Pushkarev, *Dictionary of Russian Historical Terms from the Eleventh Century to 1917*, ed. George Vernadsky and Ralph T. Fisher, Jr. (New Haven, 1970), s.v. *mir* and *obshchina*.

tional commune, but confusion grew when the term was later used also in connection with peasant groups which had no communal land property.⁸

There are two problems with Goehrke's treatment. First, he finds that the Slavophiles had a fairly precise definition of *obshchina* from the outset. I do not. Second, his discussion of a *mir* with repartitional land tenure, though commendably clear, implies more precision and universality than the term merits. There was no uniform system or set of practices and activities which distinctly identified all Russian *miry*. For this reason, and despite the objections which might understandably be raised, I have deliberately left my definition of *mir* rather more nebulous than Goehrke's.

It should be noted, at this point, that Soviet authors seldom face the question confronting us, nor do they need to. They rarely use the word *mir*, and the *obshchina* has been defined for them by the ultimate arbiter in such matters—Lenin. Lenin once declared that “the *obshchina* is a union for the possession [*po vladeniiu*] of allotment land”⁹ (in the postemancipation era). His scholarly disciples continue in similar fashion:

A land community—the *obshchina* was an organization of the peasantry in a natural economy in conditions of extensive, primarily three-field farming. The *obshchina* in a seminatural economy had to secure to the peasants a correct distribution of allotment land in appropriate quantity and of suitable quality for each household. . . . in its own way the *obshchina* also regulated land use.¹⁰

Although this definition is not far off the mark, it is too limited and self-assured. There is at least one thing, however, on which both Soviet and Western scholars would agree in discussing *mir* and *obshchina*: “in non-technical literature the two terms tend to be used interchangeably.”¹¹

Russian peasants probably never referred to their village, themselves, or any unit which they formed as an *obshchina*.¹² The term employed almost universally was *mir* or, infrequently, *obchestvo* or *obshchestvo*. What was the source of the institution and the name *mir*, what did the peasants mean by the word *mir*, and what, if any, is the relationship between the idea of the *mir*

8. Carsten Goehrke, *Die Theorien über Entstehung und Entwicklung des "Mir"* (Wiesbaden, 1964), pp. 1–5.

9. V. I. Lenin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 16, p. 264, quoted in S. M. Dubrovskii, *Stolypinskaia zemel'naia reforma* (Moscow, 1963), p. 49.

10. Ibid.

11. Marc Raeff, ed., *Russian Intellectual History: An Anthology* (New York, 1966), p. 228 n.

12. V. Trirgov, *Obshchina i podat'* (St. Petersburg, 1882), p. 91; A. I. Vasil'chikov, *Zemlevladenie i zemledelie v Rossii i v drugikh evropeiskikh gosudarstvakh*, 2nd ed. (St. Petersburg, 1881), vol. 1, p. xxxvi and vol. 2, p. 122; Sterling, Eudin, and Fisher, eds., *Features*, pp. 596–97.

held by peasants and that held by intellectuals, officials, and the upper classes in general?

This article cannot go into a lengthy examination of the origins of particular village organizations. Such discussions are already legion in the scholarly literature.¹³ The historical sketch which follows is only meant to give a brief synopsis of current knowledge. There is little doubt that peasant village communities of some kind have existed in the geographical area we loosely call Russia from pre-Kievan times. Specific features of these communities are matters of considerable ongoing debate. It is possible that the earliest peasant organizations exercised a form of collective ownership over some or all of the lands their peasants cultivated. But it is more than probable that some or all of these communities had no such form of ownership. These communities were probably known by various names, and some of them may have survived in the Kievan terminology which is familiar to us. For example, the words *verv* and *mir* (their modernized forms) appear to date from at least the eleventh century and may have been in use much earlier. They occur in redactions of the famous *Russkaia Pravda* of Iaroslav Mudryi and his sons.¹⁴ There seems to be no reason to suspect that *mir* was the coinage of a literate upper class, which was imposed upon the peasantry. Thus *mir*, for peasants and others, presumably was always a generic term for peasant village-type communities with a variety of structures and functions.¹⁵

The term *mir* has remained in continuous usage among peasants from Kievan days to the twentieth century.¹⁶ Of course, this does not mean that

13. Among the best treatments of the problem of the origins of Russian peasant "communes" are Goehrke, *Die Theorien*; Michael B. Petrovich, "The Peasant in Nineteenth-Century Historiography," in *The Peasant in Nineteenth-Century Russia*, ed. Wayne S. Vucinich, pp. 206-18; S. M. Dubrovskii, "Rossiiskaia obshchina v literature XIX i nachala XX v. (Bibliograficheskii obzor)," in *Voprosy istorii sel'skogo khoziaistva, krest'ianstva i revoliutsionnogo dvizheniia v Rossii*, ed. L. M. Ivanov et al. (Moscow, 1961), pp. 348-61; A. A. Kizevetter, "Krest'ianstvo v russkoi nauchno-istoricheskoi literature," in *Krest'ianskaia Rossiia*, vol. 5-6 (Prague, 1923), pp. 23-43.

14. *Russkaia pravda po spiskam akademicheskomu, karamzinskomu i troitskomu*, ed. B. D. Grekov (Moscow-Leningrad, 1934), p. 5; *Medieval Russian Laws*, trans. and annotated by George Vernadsky (New York, 1969), pp. 4-5, 13, 28, n. to art. 13.

15. It is frequently pointed out that the word *mir* in Russian also means "peace" and "the world." It is easy to see how the village in which the peasant lived was his whole world. The connection with the meaning "peace" is more nebulous, though etymologically the root is the same. Perhaps for this reason, in old Russian orthography, *mir* was spelled with an "a" to mean "peace" but with an "i" to denote both "the world" and the "peasant village community."

16. The assertion of continuous usage is based on logic. Copies of the *Russkaia Pravda* from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries contain the word *mir* (see note 13 above). Collections of peasant proverbs from the eighteenth century have examples of sayings wherein the word *mir* means either "world" or, more likely, "peasant community." Cf. Ippolit Bogdanovich, comp., *Russkie posloviitsy* (St. Petersburg, 1785), part 1, pp. 15, 25, 33, 35, 36, 51, 72, 73; part 3, pp. 12, 13, 17, 21, 22. Similar collections from the nine-

the institution described by the term has always been the same. It is extremely unlikely that the forms of peasant landownership in Kievan and medieval times featured the repartition or redistribution of lands. Similarly, the peasant *miry*, apparently autonomous bodies in earlier centuries, became increasingly controlled by private lords (*pomeshchiki*) or the state during the Muscovite ascendancy. Before the eighteenth century, however, the majority of peasant *miry* probably resembled the *mir* of the nineteenth century in almost every respect except that of land tenure practices.

By the eighteenth century, peasant village communities existed which held land collectively, farmed most of it individually, and redistributed some of it periodically.¹⁷ Increasing population density, governmental action, and landlord encroachment—working separately or in tandem—had led to this form of landholding. Whether the landlord, the state, or the peasants themselves inaugurated the practice of land redistributions, the purpose was usually the same: to equalize peasants' tax-paying abilities and/or to insure "social security" in the community (by providing some land for subsistence to all). At the same time, other peasant village communities survived which did not redistribute their arable at all. *Mir* was the name given to each type of community by both peasants and "outsiders"—government officials and landlords. All the land held collectively by the communities—however cultivated—was generally called *mirskaia zemlia*.¹⁸ It appears that the type of tenure wherein land was held collectively and redistributed for individual use had no special name in common use at this time.¹⁹

One should emphasize that in the early nineteenth century there was no discrepancy between the terminology used by peasants and that used by nonpeasants to refer to the Russian village. The word used was *mir* and it had two very simple and almost universally known meanings. Thus, the 1814 edition of the Russian Academy's dictionary defined *mir* as "a community [*obshchestvo*]" and as "the assembly of inhabitants of any village." (The word "community" clearly implied "a community of peasants.") The dictionary added two illustrations of the term's use: "Vybran mirom v starosty,

teenth century demonstrate that *mir* was used to denote the peasant village (see Vladimir I. Dal', *Posloviitsy russkogo naroda: Sbornik* [Moscow, 1862], pp. 431–33).

17. See notes 21 and 22 below.

18. Cf. S. G. Pushkarev, "Proiskhozhdenie krest'ianskoi pozemel'no-peredel'noi obshchiny v Rossii," part 2, *Zapiski nauchno-issledovatel'skogo ob'edineniia (Russkii svobodnyi universitet v Prage)*, vol. 10, no. 77 (Prague, 1941), pp. 197, 199, 224, n. 14.

19. Names possibly used in referring to this special type of tenure (in the adjectival form, modifying *vladenie*) were *obshchestvennoe* (cf. note 23 below) or *dushevoe* (see V. E. Postnikov, *Iuzhno-russkoe krest'ianskoe khoziaistvo* [Moscow, 1891], p. 34; for a nineteenth-century example of this term's use). The system of redistribution (not tenure) was called simply *uravnenie zemli* by nonpeasants (see Pushkarev, "Proiskhozhdenie," pp. 191, 193, 194, 199).

v vybornye"; and "Ego za bezlutstvo prigovorili mirom odat' v soldaty."²⁰ Literary figures like the great fabulist Ivan Krylov and Pushkin also knew and utilized the word. Krylov called one of his fables of 1816 "Mirskaia skhodka" ("A Mir Assembly") and Pushkin has several references to the *mir* by name in his 1830 *History of the Village Goriukhino*.²¹ A problem arose only when a few educated Russians decided that the *mir*—particularly that with redistributive tenure—was something special and needed a new and distinctive name.

Although the impulse to christen the *mir* having redistributive tenure with a new name was slow to grow, it does not mean that this institution of peasant life went unnoticed by nonpeasants. In fact, as Pushkarev has shown, not only were most landlords probably aware of the system, but the *pomeschik* was often responsible for imposing land redistributions on the *mir*.²² Moreover, a large number of prominent persons in the reign of Catherine II had taken note of the phenomenon. Among those who commented upon the presumed ill or beneficial effects of equalizing, repartitional landholding were statesmen (I. P. Elagin, S. M. Koz'min, and several delegates to the legislative commission of 1767); agriculturists (Andrei Bolotov, F. Udalov, Baron F. Wolff, and other members of the Free Economic Society); a governor of Siberia (a relative of the scholar Boris Chicherin); the famous "radical" Alexander Radishchev; and the well-known historian Ivan Boltin.²³ And, in the early nineteenth century, the Decembrists Nikita Murav'ev and Pavel Pestel' also discussed "communal" land tenure in their reform plans.²⁴

20. *Slovar' akademii rossiiskoi, po azbuchnomu poriadku raspolozhennyi*, s.v., *mir*.

21. I. A. Krylov, *Sochineniia v dvukh tomakh* (Moscow, 1969), 2: 92–93, 449 n.; A. S. Pushkin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v desiatikh tomakh* (Moscow-Leningrad, 1949), 6: 190–93. Cf. V. V. Vinogradov et al., eds., *Slovar' iazyka Pushkina* (Moscow, 1957), s.v. *mir* and *mirskoi*.

22. Pushkarev, "Proiskhozhdenie," pp. 186–99. See also V. A. Aleksandrov, *Sel'skaia obshchina v Rossii (XVII-nachalo XIX v.)* (Moscow, 1976).

23. See I. V. Chernyshev, *Agrarno-krest'ianskaia politika Rossii za 150 let* (Petrograd, 1918), pp. 79–80; V. I. Semevskii, *Krest'ianskii vopros v Rossii v 18 i pervoi polovine 19 veka*, vol. 1 (St. Petersburg, 1888), pp. 29–30, 68–70, 81–88, 107–18, 132–34; V. V[orontsov], "Ocherki obshchinnogo zemlevladieniia," *Otechestvennye zapiski*, no. 1 (January 1882), pp. 237–38; Goehrke, *Die Theorien*, pp. 7–9; E. V. Prikazchikova, *Ekonomicheskie vzgliady A. N. Radishcheva*, 2nd ed. (Moscow, 1949), pp. 85–86; I. N. Boltin, *Primechaniia na istoriiu drevniia i nyneshniia Rossii G. Leklerka*, vol. 2 ([St. Petersburg], 1788), pp. 340–43.

24. Neither of these men attached any great significance or advantages to "communal" (their term was *obshchestvennoe*, not *obshchinnoe*) tenure. See P. I. Pestel', *Russkaia Pravda. Nakaz Vremennomu Verkhovnomu Pravleniiu* (St. Petersburg, 1906), pp. 82–86, 203–4; V. I. Semevskii, *Politicheskie i obshchestvennye idei dekabristov* (St. Petersburg, 1909), pp. 611–12, 624–29. In contrast, another Decembrist, M. A. Fonvizin, insisted on retention of communal landholding in his plans for Russian agriculture (see Semevskii, *Krest'ianskii vopros*, vol. 1, pp. 363–69).

The term eventually associated with the type of *mir* having a special form of landholding was *obshchina*. The word had been in use for centuries. In early Rus' the noun existed only in the forms *ob'china* or *opchina*. It had several meanings: (1) common property (modern equivalents of *obshchee imenie* or *obshchestvennoe imushchestvo*); (2) intercourse, contact (*obshchenie*); (3) copulation, a joining (*sovokuplenie, soedinenie*); (4) a society or community (*obshchestvo*); (5) a union (*soiuz*); and (6) a monastic community.²⁵ The following two examples demonstrate its use. The first is from the Novgorod Primary Chronicle in a redaction dating from at least the fifteenth century:

Prislasha pleskovitsi posly k Novugorodu s poklonom: "Idet' na nas rat' nemechkaia . . . oboronite nas." Novgorodtsi zhe ne umedliashe ni maia poekhasha vborze v velikuiu piatnitsiu, a in'gi v velikuiu subotu, a ob'chiny vsi popechatav.²⁶

The second example is a translation from the Bible, Leviticus, chapter six, verse two: "I solzhet k drugu o vdanii ili o obshchine."²⁷ By the third decade of the nineteenth century the Russian Academy was defining the word in somewhat narrower terms. Its dictionary gave *obshchina* (now in modern orthography) only two meanings: "That which belongs to many" and *skladchina* (money or grain store available for common consumption or use).²⁸

Thus the term *obshchina*, though in general circulation in the 1830s, had no specific meaning of "peasant village community" nor any direct connection with land tenure. Credit for the creation of the neologism and of a broad new concept which overshadowed all other meanings of the word must be divided almost equally between two Slavophiles, Aleksei Khomiakov and Ivan Kireevskii.

Khomiakov was apparently the first person to use the word *obshchina* in a sense close to that which later became so popular. The definitions of *obshchina* given above do reveal, however, that the word had always had meanings similar to those which the Slavophiles bestowed on it. In particular, echoes of the ideas of a community, common or collective property, and a

25. I. I. Sreznevskii, *Materialy dlia slovaria drevne-russkogo iazyka po pis'mennym pamiatnikam*, vol. 2 (St. Petersburg, 1902; photographic reproduction: Graz, Austria, 1955), s.v. *obshchina*; G. E. Kochin, comp., *Materialy dlia terminologicheskogo slovaria drevnei Rossii*, ed. B. D. Grekov (Moscow-Leningrad, 1937), s.v. *ob'china, opchina*; A. L. Diuvernua, *Materialy dlia slovaria drevne-russkogo iazyka* (Moscow, 1894), s.v. *obshchina*.

26. Kochin, *Materialy*.

27. *Slovar' akademii rossiiskoi*, s.v. *obshchina*.

28. Ibid. At about this time, Pushkin used the plural of the word in the sense of "commoners"; the British House of Commons was called *palata obshchin* in the nineteenth century.

religious brotherhood appear in the Slavophile concept of an *obshchina*. And in a search for precedents, one might well pay particular attention to an interesting appearance of the word *obshchina* in 1835. In an article describing his travels along the Volga and to the Caucasus, one Ia. Saburov told of his visit to the small community of Moravian Brothers named Sarepta. Saburov called this prosperous, egalitarian colony—almost all of whose property was collective (*obshchestvennye*)—an *obshchina*.²⁹ Khomiakov, who saw the peasant *mir* as almost a religious group, may have taken his cue from Saburov. Khomiakov was a major collaborator (along with Kireevskii) on the *Moskovskii nabliudatel'*, which published the travel article.

Nevertheless, when Khomiakov first used the term *obshchina* in 1838—in a famous talk entitled “On the Old and the New”—he obviously did not have in mind peasant village communities per se. He was searching for ways to describe and to make intelligible the life of pre-Petrine Russia. His description of that life reveals his notions, not yet fully clarified, of a Christian people who knew and exhibited truth, mutual love, freedom, and some democratic ideals. This moral, even religious, way of life was, in his words, “pure and patriarchal” (or almost patriarchal), where “patriarchal” referred to a natural simplicity as opposed to artificiality.³⁰ Khomiakov associated these positive elements of life with such specific institutions as medieval Russia’s towns and communities (*goroda* and *obshchiny*) and particularly with what he called “the regions” (*oblasti*). It is quite possible that he in fact had rural, peasant Russia in mind when he spoke of *obshchiny* and *oblasti*. He also used the phrase *obshchinnyi byt* with the apparent connotation of an autonomous, moral way of life.³¹ In all, Khomiakov used the noun *obshchina* (in the plural) and the adjective *obshchinnyi* only once each. Clearly, they were not yet pillars of his thought.

When Ivan Kireevskii responded to Khomiakov’s talk, he followed Khomiakov’s line of thought in part, but took the important step of associating what was best in pre-Petrine Russia more directly with the peasants and their village organizations, which he called by the familiar term *miry*.³² (Indeed, the word *obshchina* did not even appear in Kireevskii’s piece; the myth was still in genesis.) But, for three reasons, Kireevskii should not be given too much credit for the invention of the myth of the “commune.”³³ First,

29. Ia. Saburov, “Poezdka v Saratov, Astrakhan i na Kavkaz,” *Moskovskii nabliudatel'*, book 2 (May 1835), pp. 201–2.

30. A. S. Khomiakov, “O starom i novom,” *Sochineniia*, vol. 3 (Moscow, 1900), pp. 13–14, 17, 28–29.

31. *Ibid.*, pp. 25–26.

32. *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii I. V. Kireevskogo v dvukh tomakh*, ed. M. O. Gershenzon (Moscow, 1911), 1:115 (hereafter cited as Kireevskii, *Polnoe sobranie*).

33. Special credit for this “discovery” has been given to Kireevskii by Peter Christoff (*An Introduction to Nineteenth-Century Russian Slavophilism: A Study in Ideas*, vol. 1:

Khomiakov had implied that the virtues of early Russia which he described were largely to be found in rural, outlying areas of the country, not in the capital cities. Second, he himself had spoken of the *mir*, or at least of some of its features. He asserted that the contemporary village assemblies (*skhodki*) and *mir* decisions (*mirskie prigovory*) were vestiges of an earlier peasant life—one of literacy, love, justice, and, presumably, democratic organization—still sung about in his day.³⁴ Third, Kireevskii seemed to borrow at least some of his notions about the *mir* directly from Khomiakov. For example, Khomiakov states that “the time has come for us to understand that an individual attains his moral aim only in a society where the forces [*sily*] of each belong to all and the forces of all, to each.”³⁵ Kireevskii says that in early Russia “an individual belonged to the *mir*, the *mir* to him.”³⁶

In any case, these two thinkers together can be seen as the inventors of the new meaning of *obshchina*.³⁷ In the years after 1838, the concept of the *obshchina* continued to develop. It became linked primarily to a set of ideas which reflected the major interests of leading Slavophiles: religious sensibility; love of the Russian past; a Romantic interest in the peasant, nature, and naturalness; agriculture and farming; the idea of self-government; dreams of a Christian social harmony; and the institution of property, particularly landownership. This complex of ideas found its reflection in the idealized picture of the *mir* of the Russian past. The Slavophiles, ascribing to that institution qualities or features quite flattering to the peasantry, made the perhaps natural but quite unproven assumption that the contemporary village scene also shared some or all of these attributes. By 1842, the linkage of *mir* and *obshchina* was becoming standard in Slavophile writings. The terms were even being substituted freely for one another.³⁸ Furthermore, use of the words *obshchina* and *obshchinnyi* to mean a peasant village community was fast spreading to almost all educated Russians. Even a so-called Westerner like

A. S. Xomjakov [The Hague, 1961], pp. 206–7; vol. 2: I. V. Kireevskij [The Hague, 1972], pp. 82 and 202) and by Abbott Gleason (*European and Muscovite: Ivan Kireevsky and the Origins of Slavophilism* [Cambridge, Mass., 1972], p. 165).

34. Khomiakov, “O starom,” pp. 13, 23–25, 28–29.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

36. Kireevskii, *Polnoe sobranie*, p. 115.

37. A measure of imprecision seems unavoidable in any use of the word *obshchina*. Here the term can be understood as both the (*krest'ianskaia*) *pozemel'naia obshchina* (perhaps the most common name used in technical literature) and the *sel'skaia obshchina*. It would be fruitless, if not impossible, to attempt to define differences in meaning between these two terms as used in the last century. For a useful discussion of *obshchina* and *mir* terminology, see Goehrke, *Die Theorien*, pp. 1–5.

38. See, for example, Khomiakov, “O sel'skikh usloviiakh” and “Eshche o sel'skikh usloviiakh,” *Sochineniia*, vol. 3, pp. 63–85.

K. D. Kavelin, presumably antipathetic to most Slavophile ideas, found the neologism congenial.³⁹

The idea of the *obshchina* soon became part of a full-blown ideology for most Slavophiles (for example, Konstantin Aksakov and Iurii Samarin, in addition to Khomiakov and Kireevskii). In the process it lost whatever slight lexical precision it may have had. The word took on unwarranted connotations as more and more writers of all bents overused and abused the term. Of course, some writings of this period have merit and value; many descriptions of contemporary villages contain useful treatments of *obshchinnoe vladenie* and *obshchina* life.⁴⁰ But we cannot afford now to get entangled further in the terminological confusion of the 1840s and 1850s. The ways in which Slavophiles, radicals, and other Russians came to employ the word *obshchina* have been described many times in scholarly literature.⁴¹ It is sufficient to point out that what most people who overworked the term had in common was a firm belief that Russian life had been better in the past and would be better in the future than it was in their day, and that one key to this better world was the peasant *mir* with repartitional tenure.

It is not surprising that the term *obshchina* (or, more accurately, its derivatives) did not enter the government's lexicon until the drafting of the 1861 emancipation statutes. Under serfdom, officials handled almost all state-peasant relations—including taxation and military recruitment—either directly or indirectly (via *pomeshchiki*) through an organization for which they already had a perfectly acceptable name: the *mirskoe obshchestvo* (or *sel'skoe obshchestvo*).⁴² Slavophiles, who were enlisted to help write the great laws of the 1860s, introduced into the legislation at least the adjectival form of the

39. *Sobranie sochinenii K. D. Kavelina*, vol. 4 (St. Petersburg, 1900), pp. 250 n., 253 n., 317 (hereafter cited as Kavelin, *Sobranie sochinenii*).

40. See, for example, Iurii Samarin, "O pozemel'nom obshchinnom vladenii," *Sochineniia Iu. F. Samarina*, vol. 3 (Moscow, 1885); the article originally appeared in *Sel'skoe blagoustroistvo* in 1858. But perhaps the best observations on the subject came from a foreigner, the German Baron Haxthausen, who "discovered" the Russian repartitional *mir* for Europeans. See his *Studien über die inneren Zustände, das Volksleben, und insbesondere die landlichen Einrichtungen Russlands*, vols. 1 and 2 (Hanover, 1847), vol. 3 (Berlin, 1852).

41. Some of the best secondary works on this subject include N. V. Riasanovsky, *Russia and the West in the Teaching of the Slavophiles* (Cambridge, Mass., 1952); Christoff, *Xomjakov*; Martin Malia, *Alexander Herzen and the Birth of Russian Socialism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1961), and his "Herzen and the Peasant Commune," in *Continuity and Change in Russian and Soviet Thought*, ed. Ernest J. Simmons (Cambridge, Mass., 1955). See also my "The Peasant Commune in Russian Thought 1861-1905" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1973).

42. Cf. *Polnoe sobranie zakonov rossiiskoi imperii*, 2nd collection, no. 4677, art. 310; *ibid.*, no. 11189, *passim* (hereafter cited as *P.S.Z.*). Also see *ibid.*, *Ukazatel' alfavitnyi* (vol. 42, part 2), s.v. *mir i mirskie skhody*.

neologism *obshchina*, but nowhere in these statutes did they use or attempt to define the noun *obshchina*. This fact alone is indicative of the prevailing uncertainty and confusion concerning the true meaning of the word.

The standard term designating all peasant village communities in this and succeeding tsarist legislation was *sel'skoe obshchestvo*. In 1861 the law defined *sel'skoe obshchestvo* as a community

composed of peasants settled on the land of one *pomeshchik*: it can consist either of an entire village [*selenie*] (*selo* or *derevnia*), or of one part of a scattered village, or of several small, as far as possible contiguous and, in any case, very close settlements . . . using all lands or some of them in common [*soobshcha*] or else having other common economic interests.⁴³

All lands allotted to a *sel'skoe obshchestvo* were held collectively and called *mirskaia zemlia* (plural: *mirskie zemli*). Only here, with respect to landholding, did the new terminology appear. *Obshchinnye zemli* was the name given to that part of a *mir's* lands which were cultivated individually but which were redistributable. And *obshchinnoe pol'zovanie* was the label given to this form of land use which combined public (collective) and private (individual) aspects of tenure.⁴⁴

The government's sanction of *obshchina* terminology in its most important laws in no way eliminated ambiguities in meaning. In the 1860s most educated Russians probably equated *mir* and *obshchina*. At least, that is what one significant source shows. In 1865, Vladimir Dal', the great lexicographer and student of peasant life, published his famous explanatory dictionary. He gives *obshchina* as one definition of *mir*. (The other definition given is *skhodka*—assembly.) There is no mention of landownership under *obshchina*.⁴⁵

At about this time, the attention of those who studied the peasantry seemed to shift away from attempts to define the whole of the *obshchina* more precisely. A consensus of sorts had emerged from twenty years of discussion. No matter what else an *obshchina* might be (or had been), perhaps the least objectionable definition was to call it a *mir* with *obshchinnoe vladenie* of its land. Definitional efforts increasingly centered on *obshchinnoe vladenie*, and the advantages of focusing on the institution of land tenure per se were substantial. *Obshchinnoe vladenie* had been a subject of much discussion in

43. Ibid., no. 36657, art. 40. V. I. Orlov's celebrated 1879 definition or breakdown of *obshchiny* into simple (*prostye*), divisional (*razdel'nye*), and compound (*sostavnye*) was basically only a restatement of this paragraph. See his *Sbornik statisticheskikh svedenii po moskovskoi gubernii*, vol. 4, part 1: *Formy krest'ianskogo zemlevladieniia v moskovskoi gubernii* (Moscow, 1879), p. 6.

44. P.S.Z., no. 36657, arts. 51 and 54; *ibid.*, no. 36662, art. 113 and n.

45. V. I. Dal', *Tolkovyi slovar' zhivogo velikoruskogo iazyka* (Moscow, 1865), s.v. *mir* and *obshcha'*, *obshchi'*.

earlier years. As noted above, the Slavophiles, Baron Haxthausen, and other observers had painted an adequate picture of this form of landholding before 1861. But the emancipation had changed matters irrevocably. Peasants were now in the process of becoming *sobstvenniki* (owners) as well as *vladel'tsy* (holders) of the land they cultivated. Officials, the courts, landlords—all those who had to deal often and directly with an emerging free citizenry—needed more exact, more systematic, and more authoritative information concerning peasant customs, economics, and legal ways than pre-emancipation writings offered. The empirical investigation of the peasantry by *zemstvo* statisticians, jurists, and other researchers took on enormous proportions in the post-1861 decades.

One can see the changing state of knowledge by comparing a discussion of *obshchinnoe vladenie* in 1865 with studies of the same subject from the following decade. Four years after the emancipation, a committee of the Free Economic Society addressed itself to the question: What is the difference between *obshchee* (common), *obshchestvennoe* (public), and *obshchinnoe vladenie*? The accepted answer was that *obshchee vladenie* assumed both common ownership and common management (*khoziaistvo*); *obshchestvennoe vladenie* assumed divided ownership but common management; and *obshchinnoe vladenie* assumed common ownership but divided (individual) management.⁴⁶ The explanation was simple and neat but necessarily incomplete in the special case of peasant landholding, because it was designed to cover all things so held. Moreover, such an interpretation was not new; this esteemed learned society was only putting an authoritative stamp of approval on explanations given by writers many years before.

In the 1870s, however, jurists and legal scholars were discussing more fundamental questions about the nature of the right of ownership invested in the peasants by government legislation. One American scholar has recently reported that a dichotomy of views on this matter existed in the postemancipation decades:

There was a division of opinion on whether the *obshchina* was a legal entity that owned the land itself or was merely a relationship among its individual members who were themselves the owners of the land. The former view may be designated as “organic” and the latter as “mechanistic.”⁴⁷

He then identifies K. P. Pobedonostsev and S. V. Pakhman as being in the “organic” camp, and places K. D. Kavelin in the much smaller “mechanistic”

46. *Trudy vol'nogo ekonomicheskogo obshchestva*, vol. 4, part 4 (November 1865), pp. 345–46.

47. Watters, “The Peasant,” p. 135. This terminology seems unduly influenced by sociological theories of Durkheim or Tönnies.

group. It is difficult to agree with such an interpretation. The 1861 statutes left little doubt that the ownership of all lands transferred to peasant communities was collective, not individual, unless and until such time as an individual peasant (or the whole group) succeeded in paying off all redemption dues on his (its) allotment. If a peasant chose to remove his redeemed land from the *obshchina*, and the community permitted this, then, of course, the peasant alone owned the land—but he was no longer part of the *obshchina*. Conversely, if he left his redeemed plot as *obshchinnaia zemlia*, then the *obshchina* continued to exercise some collective rights over it.

Pobedonostsev, Pakhman, and Kavelin all concluded, correctly, that *obshchinnoe vladenie* was a form of collective, not individual, ownership.⁴⁸ The more difficult question faced by each—and these three were among the most influential men to write on *obshchinnoe vladenie*—was whether or not the *obshchina* was a juridical person. Here the answers were more varied. Pakhman saw the *obshchina* as a corporate body and as a juridical person which delegated some of its rights to other juridical persons (its members). Pobedonostsev hedged somewhat, agreeing that the *obshchina* was definitely a corporate body of some sort, but adding that it was not an ideal, juridical person. Kavelin held that

with respect to communal tenure, the community of householders is a juridical person of a special sort, represented not by their majority but by the aggregate of all. As a consequence, every disposition of the property in communal tenure presumes the agreement of all householders.⁴⁹

Decisions of the Ruling Senate in the 1880s fully upheld the majority view of Russian jurists that the *obshchina* was indeed a juridical person and the true owner of *obshchinnye zemli*.⁵⁰

On many other points concerning *obshchinnoe vladenie* of peasant land there were significant differences of opinion. For example, some specialists argued that the system of mutual guarantee (*krugovaia poruka*) for payment of allotment redemption dues or taxes was a necessary corollary of this form of land tenure.⁵¹ Others were just as certain that it was not.⁵² Perhaps most

48. References for this and the following statements: K. P. Pobedonostsev, *Kurs grazhdanskogo prava*, 2nd rev. ed., vol. 1 (St. Petersburg, 1873), p. 465; S. V. Pakhman, *Obychnoe grazhdanskoe pravo v Rossii*, vol. 1 (St. Petersburg, 1877), pp. 12–15; Kavelin, "Obshchinnoe vladenie," *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 2 (Moscow, 1898), pp. 228–30.

49. Kavelin, "Obshchinnoe vladenie," p. 229.

50. D. I. Pestrzhetskii, *Sbornik postanovlenii, otnosiashchikhsia k grazhdanskomu pravu lits sel'skogo sostoianiiia* (St. Petersburg, 1898), pp. 186, 189–92; I. L. Goremykin, comp., *Svod zakonov i raspriazhenii pravitel'stva ob ustroistve sel'skogo sostoianiiia i uchrezhdenii po krest'ianskim delam*, vol. 1, part 1 (St. Petersburg, 1903), p. 494.

51. See, for example, Kavelin, "Obshchinnoe vladenie," pp. 247–51.

52. Pobedonostsev, *Kurs*, vol. 1, p. 470; E. I. Iakushkin, *Obychnoe pravo: Materialy dlia bibliografii obychnogo prava*, vol. 1 (Yaroslavl, 1875), p. xviii.

extraordinary was the disagreement between scholars, like Kavelin, who thought that periodic redistributions were *not* an essential feature of *obshchinnoe vladenie* and those, like Pobedonostsev and Pakhman, who treated them as pretty much indispensable in such tenure.⁵³

These different views add a dimension to the discussion of the *obshchina*. This dimension might appropriately be called ethnographic, for the new insights came from the vast number of peasant studies conducted in the post-1861 years. The investigations revealed that the *obshchina* and *obshchinnoe vladenie* were not the static institutions they once seemed to be. The structure and functions of the *obshchina* could (and did) change significantly over different parts of Russia and through time. The accurate and detailed descriptions which began to appear in the 1870s have added immeasurably to our understanding of what specific *obshchiny* were like.⁵⁴ Unfortunately, they have made it even more difficult to define the *obshchina* in general.

The problems of definition discussed in this article are almost entirely attributable to the coining of the neologism *obshchina* in the mid-nineteenth century. The word *mir* was, in all probability, a peasant-given name for a spontaneously-generated peasant organization in early Kievan or pre-Kievan times. *Mir* had been in service continuously right down to the nineteenth century. Throughout this time most Russians probably understood and used the term in the sense of a peasant village and/or its assembly of householders. But this flexible, broadly intelligible word was caught up in the confusion generated by the creation of its protean counterpart around 1840. *Obshchina*, and then *mir* also, soon became employed however the user saw fit, often in ways only loosely related to the basic meaning of a peasant village organization: for example, a democratic, self-governing unit; a Christian social union; the germ of a socialistic society; an idealized village of the distant past with a continuous existence down to the mid-nineteenth century. A great irony in all this was that among intellectuals, with a Romantic preoccupation with things “natural,” simple, and demotic, a perfectly acceptable folk word—*mir*—became at least partly supplanted by a neologism, the somewhat artificial invention of these same intellectuals.

53. Kavelin, “Obshchinnoe vladenie,” pp. 239–40; Pobedonostsev, *Kurs*, vol. 1, p. 471; Pakhman, *Obychnoe pravo*, vol. 1, pp. 18–19.

54. The best collection of such descriptions remains the anthology compiled jointly by the Free Economic and Geographical Societies: F. L. Barykov, A. V. Polovtsov, and P. A. Sokolovskii, eds., *Sbornik materialov dlia izucheniia sel'skoi pozemel'noi obshchiny*, vol. 1 (St. Petersburg, 1880) (no more volumes were published). There is an excellent bibliography of writings on the *obshchina* up to 1880 in this book. For further listings, see the four volumes published by Iakushkin under the title *Obychnoe pravo: Materialy dlia bibliografii obychnogo prava*.

Our survey has helped to answer a hoary question of Russian historiography: Who “discovered” the commune? One must remember that the English “commune” is the translation of both *mir* and *obshchina*. The question just posed then becomes something of a nonproblem. The *mir*—meaning any peasant village organization—never had to be discovered; it was always common knowledge. The *mir* with collective, repartitional land tenure—a narrow, basic definition of *obshchina*—was “discovered” (and often instituted) by many landlords and government officials who dealt directly with the peasants in the second half of the eighteenth century. Finally, Russian intellectuals invented the *obshchina* about the year 1840. The word’s meaning was nebulous from the start, but, for most Russians in the last century, *obshchina* apparently denoted a *mir* with collective, repartitional land tenure. Despite the fact that *mir* and *obshchina* were often used interchangeably, they were not identical. As the title of this piece indicates, the terms, when used together, should be joined by the conjunction “and,” not “or.”