



[DOI: 10.35549/HR.2026.2026.59.002](https://doi.org/10.35549/HR.2026.2026.59.002)

Original paper



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“A Little Bird Told Me”

Abstract

One of the principal tasks of political police of the Russian Empire was to collect information on the attitudes and sentiments of different social groups. Researchers now have access to an extensive body of documents preserved in the collections of the Third Section and the Police Department of the State Archive of the Russian Federation, in which rumors constitute one of the most important sources of information. In nineteenth-century official documents, the term *publika* (“the public”) most closely corresponds to the modern concept of “society”, and its views are reflected in numerous reports of the political police, primarily concerning urban life, especially in the capital. However, the overwhelming majority of the country’s population consisted of *narod* (“the people”), namely the peasantry. By carefully recording rumors circulating among peasants and attempting to identify the sources of those considered dangerous, political police officials frequently attributed unsettling popular gossip to the propaganda or agitation of malicious actors, although such an interpretation was by no means always justified. The rumors that spread among

the peasantry can be reduced to several fundamental issues of rural life, chiefly those connected with land, its scarcity, and the enduring hope for a “general redistribution of land” (*chernyi peredel*). Virtually all developments in the country’s domestic and foreign policy were interpreted by peasants through the prism of their expectation of the sovereign’s “grace regarding land”. The analytical and informational materials of the political police that recorded popular rumors constitute an invaluable historical source, one that “opens a window for the historian onto the collective mentality of society”. At the same time, interpreting these materials when they concern the peasantry posed considerable challenges both for the political police analysts who compiled them and for modern historians.

Keywords:

Rumors; Gossip; Peasants; Political police; Intelligence and analytical activities; Public opinion; Third Section; Police Department

For citation:

Ekaterina I. Shcherbakova. “A Little Bird Told Me”. The Historical Reporter. 2026. Vol. 59. P. 40–69. [DOI: 10.35549/HR.2026.2026.59.002](https://doi.org/10.35549/HR.2026.2026.59.002)



It is well known that the functions of the Third Section of His Imperial Majesty’s Chancellery were extremely diverse. The “Eye of the Sovereign” monitored the work of the bureaucratic apparatus, anti-government activity, and the mood of various segments of the population.

This agency was initially assigned the role of “central headquarters for monitoring general opinion and the spirit of the people”¹, because,

¹ ГА РФ. Ф. 109. Оп. 3. Д. 510. Л. 9.



Maxim Yakovlevich von Fock. Lithograph after the original by I.P. Fridrits.
From open sources

as the first Chief of the Third Section, Maxim Yakovlevich von Fock, wrote, public opinion “is the same for the authorities as a topographic map is for the commander of an army during a war”². Nicholas I always strove to be informed about the needs and aspirations of his subjects, and a key part of the annual reports of the Third Section were the “moral and political reviews”, which recorded not so much specific facts as the “general state of the collective mind”. Today, such a document would be called an analytical review. What sources did the information and analytical activities of the political police rely on?

The Third Section received information from secret agents and voluntary informants, excerpts from the intercepted correspondence, reports, and dispatches of gendarme staff officers in the governorates; all of it was the primary source of information for the political police leadership. In 1827, gendarmerie districts were organized into sections headed by staff officers, each covering one to three governorates. By the early 1830s, this structure was reorganized to provide greater coverage of the country’s gendarmerie oversight; instead of sections, directorates were set up in all governorates within the Corps’ districts (the latter,

² Гр. А.Х. Бенкендорф о России в 1827–1830 гг. (Ежегодные отчеты III отделения и Корпуса жандармов) // Красный архив. 1929. Т. 6 (37). С. 141.

with the exception of Warsaw, Siberia, and Caucasus, persisted until the establishment of provincial gendarmerie directorates in 1867).

Gendarme staff officers in the governorates were ordered to “see everything, know everything, and not interfere in anything”³, as was formulated by the Chief of the Department, Commander-in-Chief of the 3rd Section and Chief of the Corps of Gendarmes, A.Kh. Benckendorff. Reports from staff officers, which were to be compiled every six months, were attached to reports and sent directly to the capital, to the Chief of Gendarmes, bypassing the chief of the gendarmerie district; so that “the chief of the Moscow district could familiarize himself with the papers first”⁴. In St. Petersburg, the reports were studied by the head of the Third Section, whose position since 1839 had been combined with that of Chief of Staff of the Corps of Gendarmes. The most informative reports from the field ended up on the desk of the Chief of Gendarmes, who could communicate them to the Emperor⁵; in addition, they formed the basis of the annual reports of the Third Section. The frequency and form of reporting changed, but their role was retained even when the functions of political oversight were transferred from the Third Section, abolished in 1881, to the Police Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

How could gendarme officers judge the mood and public opinion in their respective governorates? Their primary source of information was their own observations, and each drew their own conclusions from these observations. “Without paid agents, the gendarmes privately collected news and rumors”⁶, writes G.N. Bibikov. “...I delve into the manifestation of rumors with particular care...”⁷ said A.A. Myshetsky, a gendarme staff officer in Olonetsk Governorate. His superior, Head of the First District of the Corps of Gendarmes, insisted on the constant need to collect “detailed information about circulating rumors; about

³ Quoted in: *Бибиков Г.Н. Жандармский надзор в системе государственного управления Российской империи (1826–1856 гг.).* М.: Квадрига, 2023. С. 94.

⁴ Ibid. С. 149.

⁵ Ibid. С. 160.

⁶ Ibid. С. 312.

⁷ *Белюсов К.Ф. Олонецкие люди оружия: из истории губернского жандармского управления.* Петрозаводск: Острова, 2021. С. 57.



Leonty Vasilyevich Dubelt. Artist: P.F. Sokolov.

From open sources

ongoing gossip and discussions on matters deserving the government's attention; about the state of minds both in the upper classes and among the common people..."⁸

In addition to the reports of gendarme staff officers, rumors, as an indicator of public sentiment, were recorded in a number of documents that were deposited in the funds of the Third Section in a set of materials for the years 1857–1869, entitled *Summaries of Intelligence Reports on Rumors Regarding Various Events in the Political, Economic, and Social Life of Russia, International Events and Incidents*⁹. They primarily concern capital-related events, as do the summaries of the most significant information communicated by L.V. Dubelt, Head of the Third Section, to A.F. Orlov, head of the political police from 1844 to 1856, during his absence from St. Petersburg. The "information notes" delivered to the Chief of Gendarmes by courier on a nearly daily basis have been preserved in the State Archives of the Russian Federation for the years 1845–1846 and 1849–1855. Furthermore, the archival materials also include individual files from the Third Section, often grouped by topic, reflecting public opinion on various socially significant issues and based primarily on rumors and hearsay.

⁸ Ibid. C. 130.

⁹ ГА РФ. Ф. 109. Оп. 3а. Д. 3213–3245.

Thus, the researcher has at his disposal a vast collection of review and analytical documents from the political police of the Russian Empire, in which rumors serve as one of the most important sources of information. Related to these are such tasks of the political police as identifying the source and preventing the "spread of disturbing rumors", which is quite logical, since monitoring untrustworthy thoughts is inseparable from preventing the relevant actions. However, when working with this data, it's important to remember that, in addition to recording rumors, the documents often reflect their interpretation. In the first case, a gendarme officer or official from the Third Section is reproducing public opinion; in the second, they're expressing their own, and separating the two can be difficult. Despite their zeal for professionalism and a desire for objectivity, political police analysts may also have their own perspective, which influences the information they present.

Anyway, rumors act as the main indicator of the sentiments of the population; the population, however, was far from homogeneous. If we reduce all its diversity to the well-known triad of "state power – society – people", the differences are quite obvious. For purposes of political control, the position of elite representatives is undoubtedly important. In 19th-century documents, the term "public" best corresponds to the modern concept of "society". It is precisely their views and sentiments that are reflected in numerous political police reports concerning urban, primarily capital, life. The "public" is distinguished from the "people", above all, by its level of education, its connection to European civilization, and, of course, its material wealth. According to S.F. Blumenau, a scholar of the French Revolution, the public is "a minority possessing 'property and culture'", as opposed to the people "with their fickle moods and mentality imbued with prejudice"¹⁰.

Public sentiment and behavior, as well as the rumors circulating within this milieu, are the focus of a number of studies, such as O.Yu. Abakumova's *The Third Section Guarding Morality and Decency. Gendarmes in the Fight Against Bribery and Vice. 1826–1866* or E.V. Balushkina's *Rumors and Gossip: Spring 1857 in St. Petersburg through the Eyes of the*

¹⁰ Blumenau С.Ф. Просвещение и проблемы истоков Французской революции: современное видение // Вопросы истории. 2003. № 9. С. 155.



Alexei Fyodorovich Orlov. Artist: F. Krüger.
From open sources

Third Section. The same cannot be said for studies of the “mindset” of the common people based on political police records.

For Russia, “the people” meant, first and foremost, the peasants. They constituted the overwhelming majority of the country’s population, and the political police paid them due attention. Carefully recording rumors circulating among the people and attempting to identify the sources of those deemed dangerous, “political detectives”, writes L. Ulyanova, “in most cases attributed the emergence of rumors to the targeted activities of various groups in society that, in one way or another, demonstrated their political beliefs”¹¹, i.e., they tried to connect the rumors that were stirring up the people with the propaganda or agitation of some malicious individuals, although such an approach was not always correct.

There are a number of issues so deeply rooted in the common man’s consciousness that they can be called fundamental. Rumors on these topics don’t require any outside intervention to form and spread; they are present in the public consciousness for generations. D.I. Uspensky,

¹¹ Ульянова Л.В. Слухи в инструментарии политической полиции. 1880–1905 гг. // Слухи в России XIX–XX веков. Неофициальная коммуникация и «крутые повороты» российской истории. Сборник статей. Челябинск: Каменный пояс, 2011. С. 293.

who surveyed peasants in Chernsky Uyezd of Tula Governorate in 1891–1892 and published his findings in the journal *Ethnographic Review*, identifies the most pressing topics of popular rumor in the title of his article, *Rumors of the People (Crop Failure — Cholera — War)*. The chosen moment for the survey was particularly poignant — the time of the catastrophic famine in the Black Earth and Volga governorates, which struck the region following a severe drought amid the poor harvests of 1889 and 1890, triggering the spread of epidemics and claiming numerous lives. The author offers very specific explanations for these disasters: in the popular imagination, they are associated with the evil will of a witch who sends drought, the actions of doctors who deliberately starve the people, or the sins of the Orthodox people in general. The stories recorded by the ethnographer also contain speculation about when the plague would end, as communicated to the peasants by apparitions of the Virgin Mary, saints, and seers who foretold the future. Uspensky does not make sweeping generalizations: "People's rumors are like a sea wave", he writes. "There is no consistency in popular belief"¹². But even if this is true, the themes these rumors evoke have remained unchanged for centuries and are linked to the living conditions of peasants in the "zone of risky agriculture". Generally, the rumors circulating among the people convey either fears or hopes.

Studying the behavior of Russian peasants during the First World War, O.S. Porshneva notes: "Despite the peasants' well-known economic and social rationalism and pragmatism, their perception of events (the causes of which remained beyond their mental horizon) was determined for centuries by the action of traditional mental attitudes"¹³. The most important of these mental attitudes is connected with the idea that the land should belong to those who cultivate it.

Rumors about land and freedom — occasionally dying down, but never ceasing — were one of the main concerns of the political police. "With every new reign, with every important event at court or in state affairs, since ancient times, news of an impending change in internal

¹² Успенский Д.И. Толки народа (Неурожай — Холера — Война) // Этнографическое обозрение. 1893. № 2. С. 184.

¹³ Поршнева О.С. Российский крестьянин в Первой мировой войне (1914 — февраль 1917) // Человек и война. Война как явление культуры / Под ред. И.В. Нарского, О.Ю. Никоновой. М.: АИРО-XX, 2001. С. 192.

governance has spread among the people, and thoughts of peasant freedom have been aroused”¹⁴, analysts from the Third Section note.

In K.V. Chistov’s fascinating study of the peculiarities of popular consciousness, *Russian Folk Social-Utopian Legends*, a rumor is cited that after the death of Alexander I, for reasons unknown to the people, it was not Konstantin Pavlovich, but Nicholas, who took the throne. “It is remarkable that both of these facts were interpreted by the popular consciousness as a consequence of the fact that both Alexander and Constantine wanted to liberate the peasants”¹⁵. There was also a rumor that “Alexander gave freedom before his death, and Nicholas hid it”¹⁶.

A Brief Review of Public Opinion in 1827 contains information that “several prophecies and predictions are circulating among the peasants: they await their liberator, like the Jews their Messiah, and have given him the name Metelkin. They say among themselves: ‘Pugachev frightened the lords, but Metelkin will sweep them away’”¹⁷. Moreover, the author of the review calls for paying special attention to peasant rumors, “since we recruit our soldiers from this class”¹⁸.

In the mid-1850s, information about preparations for a peasant reform could not help but leak out into the public. A very curious conversation was recorded in the report of the Third Section from early May 1857: “The other day, a cab driver asked his passenger: ‘What’s the news, sir? Will the Empress soon give birth?’ They say that if God gives the Tsar a son, he will certainly want to give us freedom, because this son will be the Tsar’s son and more important than all his other children. — The Tsar would have done something for us long ago, but he can’t — the landowners are begging him (not to), and if he has a son now, then from this day forward, they say, all our children born from now on will be free, and for us ourselves a fee will be set to buy ourselves out to freedom, not like now — pay whatever the master wants

¹⁴ Россия под надзором: отчеты III отделения, 1827–1869 / Сост. М.В. Сидорова, Е.И. Щербакова. М.: Российский фонд культуры, 2006. С. 201.

¹⁵ Чистов К.В. Русские народные социально-утопические легенды XVII–XIX вв. М.: Наука, 1967. С. 200.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Россия под надзором. С. 24.

¹⁸ Ibid.

and some want us to pay an exorbitant price, that's why we can't buy ourselves out, but if it happens as the Tsar wants, then soon we will all be free. – Let God grant the Tsar a son – we are waiting and waiting!”¹⁹ This likely refers to Sergei Alexandrovich, who was born on April 29/ May 11, 1857. But the peculiarity of this rumor isn't that popular wisdom associates the emancipation of the serfs with a significant event in the royal family, nor is it that, in the common people's view, the Tsar has long been ready to help the peasants, but the landowners are hindering him. It's surprising that the reference is to a feasible ransom. Peasants typically viewed personal emancipation and land grants as a “royal grace” – free of charge, of course. Perhaps the point is that this conversation is being conducted by a capital coachman, somewhat immersed in the life of the educated public, among whom the terms of the peasant reform were being hotly debated.

Volumes have been written about the peasants' dissatisfaction with these conditions, and I won't dwell on them. I'll simply note that in the *Moral and Political Review* (1861), the Third Section included a part *On Peasant Affairs*, which stated: “The majority of peasants hoped to receive complete exemption from mandatory landowner-imposed duties and a free allotment of land”²⁰. Self-proclaimed “royal envoys” immediately appeared in various governorates to explain the supreme will, among them envoys from Grand Duke Konstantin Nikolaevich, Grand Duke Konstantin Pavlovich (who died in 1831), and even from the Emperor himself (it was Private Vasily Khrabrov²¹, on indefinite leave from the Oryol Infantry Regiment of General-Field Marshal of the Prince of Warsaw). K.V. Chistov asserts that “the legend of Constantine the ‘Deliverer’ was the final stage in the 250-year history of Russian legends about saviors. After the 1860s, such legends are unknown to us”²². However, this is not entirely true. Several decades later, Grand Duke Mikhail Alexandrovich would act as the “deliverer” and protector of peasant interests, as we will see below.

¹⁹ Балушкина Е.В. Слухи и толки: весна 1857 года в Санкт-Петербурге глазами Третьего отделения // Ежегодник Государственного архива РФ: публикации, исследования, рецензии / Гл. ред. С.В. Мироненко. М., 2023. С. 58.

²⁰ Россия под надзором. С. 551.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Чистов К.В. Опр. cit. С. 219.

The political police found no evidence of outside influence in all these instances of post-reform unrest. Even the peasants, disconcerted by the impostors, everywhere demonstrated unwavering faith in the tsar's goodwill, but on the other hand, they "were distrustful of the landowners and officials", who were accused of concealing the "true Manifesto"²³. The tragic events in the village of Bezdna in the Kazan Governorate were also connected to the peasants' demand for true freedom. The leader of the uprising, Anton Petrov, convinced his fellow villagers that "the Tsar has declared complete freedom, all land will henceforth belong to the peasants, and power will belong only to the Tsar. Anyone who speaks of a different freedom has been bought by the landowners"²⁴.

In addition, the Third Section reported that rumors had spread widely that in two years, "a new, complete will would be declared, granting land, and that those who agreed to the conditions now proposed by the landowners would be deprived of this right. Therefore, the introduction of statutory charters met with stubborn resistance everywhere..."²⁵ This is likely due to the fact that the first two years after the reform were intended to draft these very charters, which specified the sizes of peasant allotments and obligations. It was assumed that, starting in 1863, a mass transition of peasants to land redemption would begin. Incidentally, we will encounter similar sabotage of land management innovations during the Stolypin agrarian reform, which will be discussed below.

Chronologically, the next surge in expectations of the royal "grace" and the spread of corresponding rumors occurred in the late 1870s. On the one hand, this was the time of the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878, and on the other, the *Going to the People* movement and the subsequent wave of revolutionary terrorism.

AN. Engelhardt, the author of the celebrated *Letters from the Village*, who organized a model farm on his estate in Smolensk Governorate, lived side by side with the peasants for many years, and knew the post-reform villages well, wrote that the peasants "are awaiting royal grace regarding the land. ... There are no doubts, everyone is convinced, everyone believes. It's entirely amazing how people hear and see exactly

²³ Россия под надзором. С. 552.

²⁴ Quoted in: Чистов К.В. Опр. cit. С. 214.

²⁵ Россия под надзором. С. 552–553.

what they want to see and hear”²⁶. The talk about land allocation “never ceases, but dies down until the first incident, until the first event out of the ordinary”²⁷. The latest Russo-Turkish War proved such an event; rumors of a new “decree” grew sharply, their escalation depending on news of the military’s progress. For example, after the victory at Plevna, people said, “The war will end, there will be a census, and they will distribute the land”²⁸. Note, not to take away and give to the poor, but to “equally distribute” – everyone will receive as much as they can cultivate. Moreover, it is the rebellious lords who are preventing the Tsar-father from showing “mercy regarding the land”!

These rumors intensified in 1879, likely after the assassination attempt on Emperor by Alexander Solovyov, so the peasants’ perception of the revolutionaries’ activities was quite peculiar. Even after the first assassination attempt on Alexander II, carried out on April 4, 1866, by Dmitry Karakozov, rumors spread that the shooter was a landowner seeking revenge on the Tsar for the emancipation of the peasants. However, on the other hand, the popular reinterpretation of the word “nihilist” is curious and revealing. The following conversation was recorded among onlookers present at Karakozov’s execution: “There is, my brother <...> such a sect, and it’s called the Nadelists, which means it wants to allocate (*nadelit*) land to everyone”²⁹.

Malicious people were said to be trying to destroy the sovereign out of revenge for the peasants’ freedom; “the landowners may try to hide the *Manifesto on Land*, which will certainly be given soon”³⁰. In the spring of 1881, likely in connection with the accession of a new emperor, this confidence was further strengthened. A.N. Engelhardt’s information confirms the findings of O.P. Semenova-Tyan-Shanskaya, who conducted surveys of the population of villages in the Ryazan Governorate³¹. Introduced several months after the death of the Tsar-Liberator *Regulations on*

²⁶ Энгельгардт А.Н. Из деревни. 12 писем (1872–1887). М.: Сельхозгиз, 1956. С. 407.

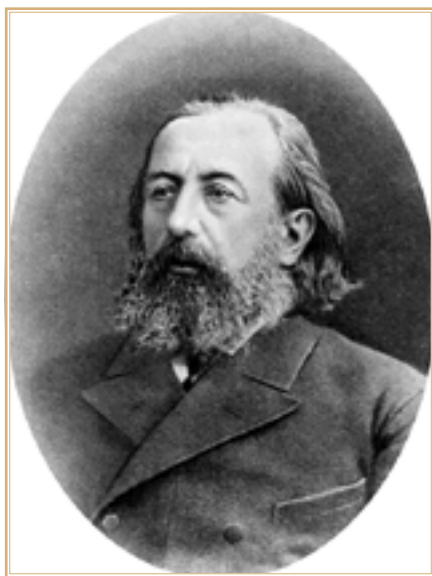
²⁷ Ibid. С. 409.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Вормс Н.А. Белый террор // Колокол. 1 января, 1 февраля, 1 марта 1867.

³⁰ Энгельгардт А.Н. Опр. cit. С. 408.

³¹ Семенова-Тян-Шанская О.П. Жизнь «Ивана». Очерки из быта крестьян одной из черноземных губерний. М.: Ломоносовъ, 2010. С. 145–146, 157.



Alexander Nikolaevich Engelhardt.
From open sources

Measures to Maintain State Order and Public Peace, when, as Engelhardt writes, “severity was introduced and orders were given to inspect everyone’s passports, stop travelers, etc.”, which gave rise to talk among the peasants that they would receive the long-awaited “grace” precisely when “the authorities caught the landowners who were rebelling”³².

The figure of the Tsar, no matter which one, is the foundation of the people’s aspirations. “According to the peasant’s concepts, ...only the Tsar thinks about everyone... The Tsar wants everyone to be equal, because he loves everyone equally, he feels equally sorry for everyone. The Tsar’s function is to make everyone equal”³³. The idea of an autocrat who stands above all and reconciles the interests of his subjects fits perfectly with a communal worldview based on ideas of equality and justice.

Before turning again to the materials of the political police, let us summarize in the words of A.N. Engelhardt: “The general conclusion that can be drawn from all these rumors and gossip is that the peasant is not satisfied with the land he has been given, that he needs more land”³⁴.

³² *Энгельгардт* А.Н. *Op. cit.* C. 411.

³³ *Ibid.* C. 413.

³⁴ *Ibid.* C. 417.

Land has always remained an integral part of people's concerns and popular rumors. The agrarian reforms of the 1860s failed to resolve the peasant land shortage problem, and neither did the Stolypin reforms. If we compare information about rumors and gossip among peasants, as cited in the moral and political reports of the Third Section, with data from the Police Department in the early 20th century, we see how little essentially changed.

The difficulties of implementing Stolypin's reforms were compounded by various rumors, which, as before, the political police meticulously documented. We have at our disposal an extremely informative source: reports on public sentiment compiled and sent to the Police Department monthly from 1909 to 1915 by governors in response to the orders of the Chairman of the Council of Ministers and Minister of Internal Affairs P.A. Stolypin (circulars of May 8 and November 16, 1907), as well as, traditionally, by provincial gendarmerie directorates.

We need to keep in mind that the conditions of the reform assumed freedom to leave the community with the due assignment of the part of the communal land as personal property. Any land in excess of the per capita allotment could be obtained at the redemption prices of 1861; if no land redistribution had occurred in a given community for 24 years, it could be obtained free of charge. A peasant had the right to demand that all his land be allocated to a “single place” in the form of a farmstead.

As we already know, the idea of land grants never left the peasants, reviving at every opportunity perceived by the public as a significant historical event. And then, as before, the peasants expected an improvement in their situation from the generosity the Tsar-father, in connection with various anniversaries, of which there were two in the near future: the 100th anniversary of the Patriotic War of 1812 and the 300th anniversary of the House of Romanov.

In the summer of 1911, a rumor was recorded in Nizhny Novgorod Governorate about the upcoming “confiscation of land from landowners” in 1912, who would be left with only their estates³⁵. By September 1911, the rumor had become more concrete. In Tver Governorate, they were saying that “community peasants would receive additional

³⁵ ГА РФ. Ф. 102. Оп. 255. А. 55. Л. 25 об., 41.

allotments, and that state, appanage, and landlord lands would be converted into these allotments”³⁶. The spread of this rumor was associated with a deterioration in the peasants’ attitude toward large landowners.

In Vladimir Governorate, there was talk that “deputies of the State Duma allegedly reported in the summer that they had introduced a bill on the forced alienation of landowners’ land in favor of the peasants, but this bill was ‘put on the back burner’ by the current Duma, and the new Duma will consider it first”³⁷. Indeed, on the eve of the Duma elections, unrest among the peasant masses could have been fueled by pre-election propaganda. For example, rumors circulated in Voronezh Governorate about widespread strikes expected in 1912, through which the Social Democratic Party, with the assistance of “troops allegedly opposed to the government”, would lift the peasants out of their oppressive situation³⁸. In Tambov Governorate, amid unrest during land management work and fires on landowners’ estates, there was persistent talk of dividing up the landowners’ lands in preparation for the upcoming 1912 uprising. Influenced by this news, peasants refused to secure their lands even under the most favorable terms, “fearing they would lose an additional allotment if they left the commune”³⁹.

When discussing the life of the peasant world, one cannot ignore such phenomena as crop failures or, conversely, good harvests, harvest seasons, and similar factors of rural life. In 1911, the Volga region suffered a crop failure, and completely fantastic rumors arose in Kazan Governorate: “Supposedly, the Emperor intended to abdicate the throne and go abroad; that the Empress, before the birth of the Heir, the Tsarevich, vowed to allocate land to the peasants, but His Majesty did not allow this to be fulfilled, as a result of which the Empress already left abroad three years ago, to join her Most August Parent, with the Heir, the Tsarevich, who had not even been baptized...”⁴⁰ In Tver Governorate, they said, “The Emperor supposedly had a second son, who remained unbaptized for two months, due to the reluctance of Empress Maria Feodorovna to agree to the need for additional land grants to the

³⁶ Ibid. A. 30 o6.

³⁷ Ibid. A. 41.

³⁸ Ibid. A. 53 o6.

³⁹ Ibid. A. 50.

⁴⁰ Ibid. A. 54. A. 54.

peasants on the occasion of this event"⁴¹. For some reason, the Dowager Empress often figures in such rumors as an opponent of land grants to the peasants. B. Kolonitsky, who worked with materials from Russian State Historical Archive, mentions rumors circulating among the people in 1914–1915: Maria Feodorovna "fell in love with Stolypin and had a child with him", which is why "the peasants weren't given land", or "they would have been given land, but the old hag is in the way"⁴².

They also reasoned that "in 1912 the peasants will be given land, and if for some reason this does not happen, then we should expect unrest similar to that which occurred in 1905; that the coincidence of the first day of Holy Easter with the day of the Annunciation was in this regard a very important omen, etc."⁴³ In Tver Governorate, "informed" people reported that "Grand Duke Mikhail Alexandrovich will seek, by force of arms, with the help of peasants and soldiers, the restoration of his lost rights to the throne, which His Highness has been deprived of by his enemies, and as a reward for this assistance, he will distribute landed estates free of charge"⁴⁴. Thus, we see again the legend of the "deliverer", without whom it is so difficult for the people to cope with their troubles.

In January 1912, in Voronezh Governorate, rumors were circulating among the peasants about a "special 'people' government, which in the spring, during the general strike, will take all the land from the landowners and the peasants who have left the commune, and will give it to the community members; the landowners and the community leavers will be burned; there is no point in buying land through the bank, since subsequently the land will be distributed to everyone for free; that in the spring there is no need to sow grain, since an armed militant party will appear, which will gain the upper hand over the landowners, rob them and distribute everything to the peasants, who will have enough free food for the whole year"⁴⁵. By the spring of 1912, rumors had again intensified that changes were to be expected at Easter – on

⁴¹ Ibid. Л. 69.

⁴² Колоницкий Б.И. Вдовствующая императрица Мария Федоровна в слухах эпохи Первой мировой войны // Слухи в России XIX–XX веков. С. 42.

⁴³ ГА РФ. Ф. 102. Оп. 255. Д. 54. Л. 54; Д. 55. Л. 1 об.

⁴⁴ Ibid. Л. 57.

⁴⁵ Ibid. Д. 55. Л. 1 об. – 2, 5.

Holy Saturday, the destruction of landowners' estates was to take place, and the "confiscation of landowners' land in favor of the peasant community" was expected⁴⁶. Compared to the 19th century, peasant sentiments increasingly show an element of aggression, and we now hear the word "take away" more often than "equally distribute".

An extremely informative report was received by the Police Department in February 1912 from Saratov Governorate. "The mood of the peasants is generally calm, but their lasting peace is hampered by dissatisfaction with the new forms of land management and the almost universal crop failure, which is expected to continue this year". According to a report by the Head of the Provincial Gendarmerie Directorate, "the revolutionary mood of the peasants has not weakened since 1905, and revolutionary agitation is currently being carried out not by the weak attempts of individual propagandists and not by the work of individual revolutionary organizations, which do not exist in the governorate, but by the general development of the self-awareness of the peasantry, interested not only in local but also in world events, which is why newspapers and especially popular rumors are increasingly spreading among the peasants, undermining those principles that the peasantry used to believe in earlier, and the fabrication of rumors is facilitated by certain failures in the matter of land management and the fight against crop failure, arising from the lack of preliminary development of these issues, as well as the lack of planning and order in their implementation"⁴⁷.

In general, the peasant perception of reality perfectly reflects the persistent opinion that "our crop failure is from God, and our famine is from the government"⁴⁸. The government and landowners, as the agents of its will in the countryside, were distrusted; even the seemingly best intentions of those in power were suspected of being flawed. Reliance on the Tsar-benefactor was increasingly diminishing, and the tendency toward radical solutions to pressing problems through one's own efforts, often resulting in violence, was growing.

Violence had often been used by the masses before to combat another persistent scourge: epidemics. One of the most devastating was

⁴⁶ Ibid. A. 7.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid. A. 14.



Emperor Nicholas I during the cholera riot in Sennaya Square, 1831.
From open sources

undoubtedly the cholera of the summer of 1831, which spread from the southeastern regions of the country all the way to the capital and its environs. The measures taken by the authorities provoked an extremely negative reaction from the population.

“...The police, whether from excessive zeal or, better yet, from the ignorance of their enforcers, began seizing and sending to cholera hospitals not only cholera patients, but also all manner of sick people, even drunks and weak people encountered on the streets. In the hospitals, most of those brought in soon died due to the doctors’ inexperience in treating this new disease. Even those who didn’t have cholera died from taking the very strong medications, for they were treated in the same way as cholera patients”⁴⁹. The Polish Uprising of 1830–1831 was in full swing, and rumors immediately spread that the people were being poisoned by “doctors bribed by the Poles”, that this was a “conspiracy to destroy the Russians”⁵⁰.

The political police noted that “the people had been acting willfully for a long time”, seizing anyone they considered suspicious on the streets; medical workers, Jews, Poles, and ordinary foreigners were

⁴⁹ Россия под надзором. С. 80.

⁵⁰ Ibid.



Emperor Alexander III visiting a cholera hospital.

From open sources

the ones most affected. Moreover, during one of the subsequent cholera outbreaks, the famine of 1891–1892, rumors circulated that people were being killed by criminals on the orders of a certain foreign tsar, who was planning to wage war against Russia but was afraid he would be unable to cope⁵¹. Provincial gendarmerie directorates reported to the Police Department that the people “placed the blame for the spread of cholera on the British or their Queen Victoria”⁵². As Stefan Wiese reports, the rumor about the British may have seemed convincing given that a delegation of British doctors was indeed working in the Volga region at the time. “It’s difficult to say”, the researcher notes, “what significance the press reports about the clash of interests between the Russian and British empires in the Middle East, as well as memories of the Crimean War, had in this context”⁵³. It seems to me that, it is worth mentioning in this context the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878, which we will discuss later.

Just as in the 1930s, in the early 1990s, cholera hospitals were being burned and doctors beaten in the Volga region, rumored to be burying

⁵¹ Успенский Д.И. Опр. cit. С. 185.

⁵² Quoted in: Визе Ш. Слухи и насилие: холерные бунты в Саратове в 1892 г. // Слухи в России XIX–XX веков. С. 309.

⁵³ Ibid.



Illarion Mikhailovich Bibikov.
From open sources

ordinary people alive. “In the Saratov area, there was talk of doctors being bribed by non-Christians; in Simbirsk Governorate, they explained that the killings were a measure to combat the disease (similar to the culling of diseased livestock). In Kazan Governorate, they said that mass deaths under the guise of cholera were occurring because ‘there was no money to feed the hungry’. ...In Nizhny Novgorod, they said the number of doctors had grown so much in recent years that they now needed more land to live on, and so they were killing people”⁵⁴. From Saratov to Kazan and Nizhny Novgorod, the rumor spread that the local administration had squandered funds allocated to help the starving, and was now spreading rumors about an epidemic in the region in order to prevent the Tsar (or, in other versions, the Tsarevich) from visiting for an inspection⁵⁵. Stefan Wiese attributes this rumor to the fact that aid to the peasants was partially provided in the form of land, which they viewed as a gift. When the Saratov governor declared that this aid would have to be repaid, the peasants perceived this as an injustice⁵⁶. That is, we see again that the main concerns of the peasants were

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid. C. 310.

⁵⁶ Ibid. C. 319.



Alexander Alekseevich Panchulidzev.
From open sources

connected with land, the shortage of which was becoming increasingly obvious by the end of the 19th century.

Another terrible disaster, invariably the subject of rumors and gossip, was fires. Very often, probably since the Time of Troubles, they were attributed to the criminal activities of the Poles. Such explanations sounded especially plausible after the Polish uprisings. The report of the Third Section for 1833 states that fires in St. Petersburg “were naturally attributed to the Poles”⁵⁷; the people also believed that the cause of the Moscow fires of 1834 was “deliberate arson by the Poles”⁵⁸. The political police’s investigations demonstrated the baselessness of the popular rumors, but they could not change the traditional attitude toward the Poles as rebels and criminals.

Sometimes popular beliefs about the causes of certain events baffle not only researchers but also contemporaries. In 1839, rumors attributed the spread of fires to “His Highness the Heir to the throne marrying the Turkish Sultan’s daughter and, in his joy, burning down three governorates. The peasants believed it!”⁵⁹ The compiler of the

⁵⁷ Россия под надзором. С. 99.

⁵⁸ Ibid. С. 118.

⁵⁹ Ibid. С. 205.

Third Section report was himself astonished. Surprising rumors have spread in Simbirsk Governorate that "landowners are setting fires to ruin their peasants, who were to be freed or given as dowries to Her Imperial Highness Grand Duchess Maria Nikolaevna. There was talk of the appearance of the late Grand Duke Konstantin Pavlovich; of the execution of nobles; and finally, they believed that the government was setting the fires to resettle estates according to a new plan"⁶⁰. They probably didn't expect anything good from the landowners and the government, just as they didn't expect anything good from the Poles.

In the same year of 1839, prolific in fires, residents of the Saratov Governorate came to the "universal conclusion that the Jews were setting fires under the secret influence of the Poles and in retaliation for the conscription service" to which Jews had been subject since 1827. "They talked about the Jews everywhere, adding that first they would burn houses and standing grain throughout Russia, and then kill people with poison". The matter did not stop with gossip and rumors; "the embittered people went wild, seeing homes and property destroyed", and lynching and immediate reprisals became commonplace⁶¹.

Moreover, even administration officials could be swayed by the crowd's strong opinions. Saratov Governor Illarion Mikhailovich Bibikov officially informed his Penza counterpart, Alexander Alekseevich Panchulidzev, that "the fires were being set by Jews bribed by the Poles to weaken Russia"⁶². And the rumor, reinforced by the authoritative opinion of the authorities, spread throughout the Volga region.

Gendarme General Stepan Vasilyevich Perfilyev, dispatched to the epicenter of the disaster, concluded that the fires were mostly caused by residents' carelessness during a prolonged drought. Arsonists were also found, but their motives were simple robbery or hatred of neighbors. "No malicious intent on the part of the Poles was found, and, in general, all the most rigorous investigations and inquiries revealed no common, deliberate mentality, no external instigation, or political goal to disrupt the Empire"⁶³.

⁶⁰ Ibid. C. 203.

⁶¹ Ibid. C. 204–205.

⁶² Ibid. C. 205.

⁶³ Ibid. C. 207.



Stepan Vasilyevich Perflyev.
From open sources

Meanwhile, fires continued to spread across Central Russia – across Nizhny Novgorod, Kazan, Orenburg, Perm, Tambov and Kostroma governorates. Some rumors circulated that the arsonists were forestry officials concealing illegal logging; others blamed dissenters persecuted by the authorities; but “the general consensus attributed the malicious acts to the Poles”⁶⁴.

A “stranger” is always suspect in the traditional mindset, and there are always ill-wishers abroad. Popular rumor in the 1890s claimed that “some foreigners appeared in Moscow and began riding around the city in carriages drawn by fine horses. They had incendiary ointment tied under their carriages. Sometimes, such a gentleman would ride up to a house and smear it with this ointment; and when the sun warmed it, the house would burst into flames. And these villains would have burned down all of Moscow, but thankfully, they were caught with lassos”⁶⁵. They explained this as the machinations of a foreign tsar who wanted to weaken Russia before going to war against it.

War, which directly affected the peasantry, the backbone of the army and the main taxpayer, was also always the subject of various

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Успенский Д.И. Опр. cit. С. 185.

rumors. In the second half of the 19th century, the Balkan crisis and the subsequent Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878 provoked the strongest public response.

In 1875, an uprising against Turkish rule by the Christian population of Bosnia and Herzegovina began, and in the spring of 1876, an uprising broke out in Bulgaria, suppressed with unprecedented brutality. The media spread reports of “Turkish atrocities”, as they called it in the Balkans. In Russia, which had long considered it its sacred mission to protect the interests of its brothers in faith, a social movement was growing. Slavic committees raised funds for the rebels and victims, and thousands of volunteers went to the aid of the warring Southern Slavs.

For the average Russian, no war waged by the Russian Empire, with the possible exception of the Patriotic War of 1812, was so relatable and understandable. They sincerely sympathized with the Slavs suffering under the Turkish yoke, and rejoiced just as sincerely at the successes of the Russian troops. Literate people read newspapers, while the illiterate spread the most outlandish rumors, such as that “the Englishwoman” (Queen Victoria), who was constantly “screwing up” Russia, “had built an underground railway to Plevna and was using it to deliver troops and provisions to the Turks, but Chernyaev immediately saw the Englishman’s road and ordered it to be blocked. Well, that’s when Plevna was taken”⁶⁶.

The peasants also discussed how to pacify the “Englishwoman”, and they saw the surest way to do so was to convert her and her subjects to Orthodoxy. “...They began to talk about a recruitment of young women, that the Tsar would give these women as a dowry for the daughter who was going to live with the Englishwoman. The women, they reasoned, would be married to Englishmen converting them to our faith”⁶⁷. These rumors were fueled by the wedding of Grand Duchess Maria Alexandrovna and Prince Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh, Queen Victoria’s second son. In 1874, he arrived in Russia, and “the presentation of the Smolensk Icon of the Mother of God to the Prince of Edinburgh gave rise to abundant speculation and rumors, all of

⁶⁶ *Энгельгардт* А.Н. *Op. cit.* C. 220.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* C. 228.



Grand Duchess Maria Alexandrovna with her fiancé Alfred,
her father, and her brother Alexei, 1873–1874.

From open sources

which can be summarized as follows: we are trying to convert the Englishwoman to our faith”⁶⁸.

For some reason, the people saw China as Russia’s ally in this and future wars. “China will rise up for us. The Tsar doesn’t trust China, afraid of being deceived, and says: ‘You, China, guard your own shores of the Black Sea, and I’, he says, ‘will guard mine’”⁶⁹. In the 90s, there was also talk about how “Tsar China” would be on our side in the upcoming war⁷⁰.

But from any foreign policy discussions, the peasants turned to the most pressing issue – the land. After the capture of Plevna, when it became clear the war was drawing to a close, talk arose of a new “Regulation” being drafted, “surveyors would come in the spring to divide the land”, and the landowners “would be paid by the treasury with what they took from the Turks”⁷¹. After the decisive victories at Shipka-Sheinovo and Philippopolis, peasants wondered how much Turkish land they had taken, and rumors swirled that “the landless would be

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid. C. 220.

⁷⁰ Успенский Д.И. Оp. cit. C. 186.

⁷¹ Энгельгардт А.Н. Оp. cit. C. 211.

resettled on Turkish soil"⁷². Rumors that "as a reward for the sacrifices made... during the war" the peasants would be given all the privately owned land⁷³, were recorded by the political police during the First World War.

Thus, identifying the range of problems that were most often the subject of rumors in the peasant environment, we can state that it begins and ends with the question of land, the centuries-old hope for a "Black/Land Repartition".

The nature of rumors as a social phenomenon has recently attracted the attention of researchers. Rumors are defined as "unconfirmed messages that, in problematic situations, spread through informal communication channels as news about significant changes in the social or natural environment"⁷⁴. The authors emphasize that they circulate within a specific group, for which they are, firstly, understandable and, secondly, important. Rumors compensate for the lack of reliable information, adapting the information received to the needs of the society in which they circulate, "revealing social phobias and hopes"⁷⁵. B.V. Dubin sees rumor as a tool that allows to interpret disturbing and incomprehensible phenomena of reality. He calls the rumors "a traditionalist reaction to a broader context, to something new and unusual"⁷⁶, when the alien and foreign is translated into understandable, one's own, categories.

In her historiographic review *Rumors in the Modern Sociocultural Environment*, E.V. Osetrova notes that the systematic study of rumors began after the First World War, with German and American

⁷² Ibid. С. 216.

⁷³ ГА РФ. Ф. 102. Оп. 255. Д. 57. Л. 203 об.

⁷⁴ Горбатов Д.С. Слухи как коммуникативный феномен // Слухи в России XIX–XX веков. Неофициальная коммуникация и «крутые повороты» российской истории. Сборник статей. Челябинск: Каменный пояс, 2011. С. 36.

⁷⁵ Никонova О.Ю. Война, рассказанная по секрету: слухи и возможности их интерпретации // Слухи в России XIX–XX веков. Неофициальная коммуникация и «крутые повороты» российской истории. Сборник статей. Челябинск: Каменный пояс, 2011. С. 98.

⁷⁶ Дубин Б.В. Слово — письмо — литература: Очерки по социологии современной культуры. М.: Новое литературное обозрение, 2001. С. 70. See: Дубин Б.В., Толстых В.А. Слухи как феномен обыденной жизни // Философские исследования. 1993. № 2. С. 136–141.

psychologists pioneering the field. The domestic tradition “exists only within the realms of Russian historiography and folklore studies”⁷⁷, although a significant number of authors have drawn on these materials in their research. Historians have reached similar conclusions: rumors play a vital role in the life of traditional societies, constituting a crucial source of knowledge and a way of understanding the world around us. Furthermore, rumors that conform to popular stereotypes can influence people’s behavior, as we have seen in the example of peasant resistance to the reforms of 1861 and 1906.

E.V. Osetrova draws attention to the attitude toward rumors and their use by government institutions. “The 1960s marked the time when US security agencies became familiar with the issue”, the author notes. “The dynamic mechanisms of unofficial information were professionally studied at the CIA and the Pentagon, based on the belief that propaganda through rumors, especially in foreign policy, is comparable to propaganda through the media”⁷⁸. Intelligence agencies can not only record and analyze rumors but also exploit them. But, as far as I know, such technologies were not yet used in the Russian Empire.

The materials of the information and analytical activities of the political police in general and those concerning rumors in particular are a valuable historical source that “opens a window for the historian into the collective mentality of society”⁷⁹. However, the social stratum that primarily interests me, namely the Russian peasantry, allows us to judge only those aspects of their lives that are obvious to the outside observer. The gulf between the educated society and the common people, which opened up during the Peter the Great era, created enormous difficulties in interpreting peasant behavior and perceptions, even for analysts from the political police. As A.N. Engelhardt, who spent part of his life in direct contact with the people, wrote: “...We, the people unaccustomed to peasant speech, mannerisms, and the way they express

⁷⁷ *Осетрова Е.В. Слухи в современной социокультурной среде: историографический обзор // Антропологический форум. СПб., 2011. Online. № 15. С. 59–60. [Electronic resource]. <https://anthropologie.kunstkamera.ru/files/pdf/015online/osetrova.pdf>*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* С. 57–58.

⁷⁹ *Джонстон Т. Слухи в СССР сталинского времени // Слухи в России XIX–XX веков. С. 25.*

thoughts, facial expressions, will never understand anything if we are present at some division of land or some settlement between peasants. ...It is even more difficult for us to understand the meaning of political rumors circulating among the people and to ascertain their views on current events”⁸⁰.

Conflict of interests

The author declares no relevant conflict of interests.



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Received
02.03.2026

Revised
02.04.2026

Accepted
04.05.2026