

Degrees of Polycentricity, or How Polycentric Can a Governance Regime Be? The Case of the Village Communities in the Russian Empire after the Emancipation

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I study polycentricity in the historical context of peasant communities in the Russian Empire. After the abolition of serfdom (1861), the Russian state lacked sufficient capacity to govern at the village level directly. Instead, it relied on the self-governing peasant communities, which maintained order in the village, provided local public goods, managed communal land, and controlled the collection of taxes and levies. How polycentric was communal governance in Russia? I investigate this question by taking a deep look at the written regulations issued by the village assemblies – the governing bodies of the village communities. I find that the village assembly was more an extension of the state's administrative apparatus than a genuinely self-governing body, but that a significant part of activities in the village was governed by informal arrangements. This conclusion raises questions about the homogeneity of polycentric governance. I argue that there are different types of polycentric arrangements depending on the degree of polycentricity – on how decentralized the rule making process is. The degree of polycentricity depends less on organizational structure than the actual rules that govern social interactions as well as on who has the power to issue specific types of rules. Without the knowledge and typology of the rules, the term polycentricity becomes too abstract and not very suitable for analysis.

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