

# The Bashagurov Brothers: A Story of Brigandage and Mobility in the Urals, 1789–1792

Andrey V. Gornostaev 

The University of Toronto, [andrey.gornostaev@utoronto.ca](mailto:andrey.gornostaev@utoronto.ca)

On June 26, 1791, several mineral surveyors, employed at the Iug (*Iugovskoi*) State Factory, learned about two unknown persons staying in a nearby house. At night, the surveyors, together with a few factory workers, stormed the house where they discovered the suspects, armed with muskets and large knives. While one of them managed to flee, the other was arrested and delivered to a factory office. At dawn, a team dispatched to capture the second suspect, who had been seen wandering with a musket in the forest, returned empty-handed. His luck, however, did not last long. On July 7, while riding disguised as a merchant, he encountered a chancellery scribe and a peasant, who found him suspicious and brought him for questioning to the village of Abramovka.<sup>1</sup>

The detainees were the brothers Ivan and Stepan Bashagurov who escaped from prison in Perm in 1789 and evaded capture for about two years. While on the run, they found employment as laborers, traveled as far as St. Petersburg, and committed numerous crimes, stealing from local villagers and raiding ships on the Kama River. Their multifaceted story provides fascinating insights into the world of bandits and ordinary people, their interactions with and perceptions of each other, and their understanding of the law. Specifically, their case reveals several facets of brigandage (*razboi*) in early modern Russia, such as the significance of migration and wage labor in the bandit way of life, and the government's emphasis on the deterrence of and punishment for harboring (*pristanoderzhatel'stvo*) that was viewed as one of the main reasons why brigandage could persist in the first place.

Considered previously a marginal phenomenon, banditry has gained a much deserving spotlight over the last half a century, with historians exploring its popular perception, social manifestations, associated violence, and

My sincere thanks to Alison Smith, Armen Manuk-Khaloyan, and two anonymous reviewers for their assistance and insightful comments on earlier versions of this article.

1. Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Permskogo kraia (hereafter GAPK), fond (f.) 12, opis (op.) 1, delo (d.) 82, list (l.) 1 (Delo o razboinikakh brat' iakh Ivane i Stepane Bashagurovykh i ikh pristanoderzhateliakh); f. 177, op. 3, d. 444, ll. 4–4 ob. (O razboinike Stepane Bashagurove).

*Slavic Review* 82, no. 3 (Fall 2023)

© The Author(s), 2024. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. doi: 10.1017/slr.2023.286

links with political structures.<sup>2</sup> Of prominence has been the debate surrounding the works by Eric Hobsbawm who, by mostly drawing on popular tales, has depicted banditry as a form of Robin Hood-type resistance existing in peasant pre-capitalist societies.<sup>3</sup> Anton Blok, one of Hobsbawm's most vocal critics, points out that Hobsbawm over-romanticizes the phenomenon by conflating two distinct points: "what peasants *wanted to believe* about bandits and who bandits *actually were*." He notes that "rather than actual champions of the poor and the weak, bandits quite often terrorized those from whose very ranks they managed to rise, and thus helped to suppress them."<sup>4</sup> Except for one recent literary article,<sup>5</sup> this debate has found no reflection in the field of Russian history, even though Hobsbawm's analysis was informed, in part, by the stories of brigands in the Volga region. Instead, an understanding of banditry in early modern Russia mostly remains within the confines of the scarce scholarship produced by Soviet and prerevolutionary researchers who, without delving deeply into primary sources, simplistically described it as a social disturbance or even as a partisan struggle against the ruling class.<sup>6</sup>

Through a detailed reconstruction of a singular archival case, this article reveals a complex image of brigandage in early modern Russia. Rather than

2. Pat O'Malley, "Social Bandits, Modern Capitalism and the Traditional Peasantry: A Critique of Hobsbawm," *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 6, no. 4 (July 1979): 489–501; Louis A. Perez Jr., *Lords of the Mountain: Social Banditry and Peasant Protest in Cuba, 1878–1918* (Pittsburgh, 1989); John S. Koliopoulos, *Brigands with a Cause: Brigandage and Irredentism in Modern Greece, 1821–1912* (Oxford, 1987); Karen Barkey, *Bandits and Bureaucrats: The Ottoman Route to State Centralization* (Ithaca, 1994); Paul Sant Cassia, "'Better Occasional Murders than Frequent Adulteries': Banditry, Violence and Sacrifice in the Mediterranean," *History and Anthropology* 12, no. 1 (2000): 65–99; Shingo Minamizuka, *A Social Bandit in Nineteenth Century Hungary: Rózsa Sándor* (Boulder, 2008); Michael Kwass, *Contraband: Louis Mandrin and the Making of a Global Underground* (Cambridge, Mass., 2014); Tolga U. Esmer, "Economies of Violence, Banditry and Governance in the Ottoman Empire Around 1800," *Past and Present*, no. 224 (August 2014): 163–99; Pascale Baker, *Revolutionaries, Rebels and Robbers: The Golden Age of Banditry in Mexico, Latin America, and the Chicano American Southwest, 1850–1950* (Cardiff, 2015).

3. E.J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Glencoe, IL, 1959); E.J. Hobsbawm, "Social Banditry," in Henry A. Landsberger, ed., *Rural Protest: Peasant Movements and Social Change* (New York, 1973), 142–57. His most recent restatement of the argument is in E.J. Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, rev. ed. (New York, 2000).

4. Anton Blok, "The Peasant and the Brigand: Social Banditry Reconsidered," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 14, no. 4 (September 1972): 494–503.

5. Roman Koropeczkyj and Robert Romanchuk, "Harkusha the Noble Bandit and the 'Minority' of Little Russian Literature," *The Russian Review* 76, no. 2 (April 2017): 294–310.

6. D.L. Mordovtsev, "Ponizovaia vol'nitsa. I–IV," *Russkoe slovo: literaturno-uchenyi zhurnal* 3, no. 1 (1861): 1–51; D.L. Mordovtsev, "Ponizovaia vol'nitsa. V–VIII," *Russkoe slovo: literaturno-uchenyi zhurnal* 3, no. 1 (1861): 1–56; N.Ia. Aristov, *Razboiniki i beglye vremen Petra Velikogo (1682–1725 g.)* (Moscow, 1868); P.K. Alefirenko, *Krest'ianskoe dvizhenie i krest'ianskii vopros v 30–50kh godakh XVIII veka* (Moscow, 1958); V.V. Mavrodin, *Krest'ianskaia voina pod rukovodstvom Pugacheva* (Moscow, 1973); V.Iu. Gessen, "Napadenie beglykh krest'ian na pomeshchich'i votchiny v 20–30-kh godakh XVIII veka," *Voprosy istorii* 12 (1954): 103–10. Notable exceptions are source-driven works by Evgenii Akel'ev, who uses microhistorical analysis to reconstruct the life of Van'ka Kain, the notorious thief in mid-eighteenth-century Moscow. Evgenii V. Akel'ev, *Povsednevnaia zhizn' vorovskogo mira Moskvy vo vremena Van'ki Kaina* (Moscow, 2012); Evgenii V. Akel'ev, "'Syshchik iz vorov' Van'ka Kain: Anatomiiia 'Gibrida,'" *Ab Imperio: Studies of New Imperial History and Nationalism in the Post-Soviet Space* 3 (2018): 257–304.

heroic or class-driven, it emerges as seasonal and opportunistic, a social phenomenon that was based on a constant assessment of one's environment and flexibility in actions. The brothers' mobility within their home region and outside enabled them not only to elude captors for a considerable time but also to continuously shift from brigandage to wage labor, thus underscoring the normalcy of ordinary people's ability to assume different social roles and the absence of a firm boundary between legal and illegal types of behavior.

Shifting to the court trial, the article then examines the effects of banditry on local rural society. No less than about the brothers, this story is about all those who sheltered them, provided employment, assisted in any way, tried to arrest, or became their victims. As Blok argues, this phenomenon can only be understood when situated within the networks of kinsmen and acquaintances who benefited and suffered from their exploits.<sup>7</sup> For late-eighteenth-century Russia, the issue of harboring affords an excellent avenue for such examination as it sheds light on various social relations and peculiarities of the legal system. On the one hand, the imperial courts' obligation to investigate every person implicated by the Bashagurovs exposes the myriad of encounters and interactions present in the everyday lives of ordinary people and their precarious dependence upon their acquaintances and relatives for survival. On the other hand, the contradictions in depositions provided by the brothers and their suspected accomplices underscore the limitations of the judicial procedure under Catherine II, arising from the priority of formal proofs and the lack of effective and flexible investigative mechanisms. Through the exploration of these questions, we not only improve our understanding of how courts dealt with crime but also hear multiple voices that sometimes agree yet more often disagree with each other, thus demonstrating a mosaic of possibilities of how the relationships between the Bashagurovs and others might have unfolded.<sup>8</sup>

### **“The Intention to Engage in Robbery”**

Prior to their imprisonment in 1789, not much is known about the Bashagurovs. Thirty-eight and twenty-eight years old respectively, Stepan and Ivan were by origin from the village of Ust'-Rechka in Okhansk district (*uezd*), Perm viceregency (*namestnichestvo*), where they dwelled with their wives in separate households. Like many others in the Middle Urals—the center of the metallurgical industry in eighteenth-century Russia—they held the status of “ascribed” (*prapisnye*) peasants who performed obligatory labor at state or private factories instead of paying the poll tax. Their site of ascription was the Votkinsk State Factory, founded by Count Petr Shuvalov in 1759 but confiscated for enormous debts by the government after his demise in 1762. The Bashagurovs' lives thus centered on alternating between tilling the fields for sustenance and working at the factory, from at least two to four weeks a year.<sup>9</sup>

7. Anton Blok, *Honour and Violence* (Malden, Mass., 2001).

8. Carlo Ginzburg urges scholars to deal with the evidence as an open window to engage with the realm of possibilities, thereby allowing us to glance behind historical actors' motives and deeds. Carlo Ginzburg, “Checking the Evidence: The Judge and the Historian,” *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 1 (Autumn 1991): 83.

9. N.I. Pavlenko, *Istoriia metallurgii v Rossii XVIII veka: Zavody i zavodovladel'tsy* (Moscow, 1962), 345–46. On ascribed peasants, see E.I. Zaozerskaia, “Sposoby

A simple coincidence brought the brothers together in 1789. Early in the summer, Stepan was arrested on charges of participating in the murder and robbery of two trading Tatars. Despite his denials, the court found him guilty and sent him to prison (*ostrog*) near Perm.<sup>10</sup> While Stepan committed a crime for the first time, his brother Ivan had a history of run-ins with the law. In 1785, he was caught stealing iron from the Votkinsk Factory and, the following year again, for thieving spring grain from storage. Theft of items worth less than twenty rubles was viewed as insufficient in meeting the threshold for imprisonment; instead, the culprit had to perform labor at a workhouse until the value of the theft plus 6 percent was worked off.<sup>11</sup> Since there was no workhouse in Perm, Ivan was sentenced to mandatory labor at the Iug Factory, where he stayed for over half a year. Several years later, in 1789, indicted for “an alleged robbery of an unknown boat sailing along the Kama,” he was punished by knouting and splitting of his nostrils and then transferred to the same prison where Stepan was.<sup>12</sup>

The Bashagurov's stay in prison was meant to be temporary, until their relocation to Irkutsk guberniia, where they would join the ranks of exiles from all across Russia and engage in lifelong hard labor. Their actual detention turned out to be even more brief. Several weeks into their reunion, in mid-July 1789, the brothers, along with other convicts, moved to Perm for short-term work. One day, they were ordered to fetch axes and tools, unescorted, from an almshouse, an opportunity that allowed them to escape and hide in a nearby forest until nightfall. The brothers clearly had been waiting for such a chance as they were carrying 27 silver rubles and survival essentials, including a knife and flint, at the time of the escape. First on foot and then by boat, they journeyed down the Kama to their “native places” (*rodnye mesta*), where, according to Stepan, they “had the intention to engage in robbery on the river.”<sup>13</sup>

Expressed so outright, this seemingly surprising “intention” suggests that the brothers realized the challenges of making an honest living and that turning to crime, despite its risks, appeared simpler and potentially more profitable. Becoming outlaws was a common choice for individuals who found themselves on the margins of society because of social, economic, or religious reasons. State decrees and court files attest to the existence of many gangs of bandits, consisting of runaway peasants, townspeople, factory laborers, Old Believers, exiles, and army deserters. These bands were especially

---

obespecheniia rabochei siloi chastnykh manufaktur vo vtoroi chetverti XVIII v.,” in *Akademiku Borisu Dmitrievichu Grekovu ko dniu semidesiatiletii: Sbornik statei* (Moscow, 1952), 284–93; Hugh D. Hudson, Bruce J. DeHart, and David M. Griffiths, “Proletarians by Fiat: The Compulsory Ural Metallurgical Work Force, 1630–1861,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 48 (October 1995): 94–111.

10. GAPK, f. 177, op. 3, d. 444, l. 5 ob.

11. For a second minor theft, the culprit additionally suffered two lashes of the whip and had to work off the sum stolen with an increment of 12 percent (6 paid to the victim and 6 to the workhouse). A third offense incurred the punishment of three lashes and an increment of 18 percent (6 paid to the victim and 12 to the workhouse). *Polnoe sobranie zakonov Rossiiskoi imperii* (hereafter *PSZ*) (St. Petersburg, 1830), vol. 21, no. 15,147 (April 3, 1781). Later, the Senate confirmed that nobody else could make a payment for the culprit who had to work off the fine by himself. *PSZ*, vol. 21, no. 15,483 (July 29, 1782).

12. GAPK, f. 12, op. 1, d. 82, ll. 11–11 ob.

13. GAPK, f. 12, op. 1, d. 82, l. 12, 59; f. 177, op. 3, d. 444, ll. 6 ob.-8; d. 455, (Po donosheniiu Permskoi verkhnei raspravy o beglom iz tiur'my razboinike Ivane Bashagurove), l. 62 ob.

visible on Russia's frontiers, along major rivers, such as the Volga, Oka, or Dnieper, and along land trade routes—areas where the state's administrative grasp remained weak even in the late eighteenth century. The area along the Kama—from Solikamsk in the north to Sarapul in the south and especially at the confluence of the Kama and Osinka rivers—was no different.<sup>14</sup> Not only did it lack any significant urban centers, but the environment itself also provided an excellent setting for brigandage. According to one travelogue from 1797, forests spread on both sides of the Kama, with clearings in areas intended for sowing crops. While the population of the region was not dense, a traveler sailing down the river would encounter a village about every ten versts (one verst is approximately 1.067 km), affording ample opportunities to dock and obtain supplies. In the spring, the Kama was full of barges and boats transporting iron, salt, and grain.<sup>15</sup>

In 1774–75, this area suffered widespread damage and population loss during the famous revolt of Emelian Pugachev, a Don Cossack. Outraged by abysmal wages and working conditions, many ascribed peasants joined the ranks of the Pugachev rebels to castigate state administrators and factory owners for years of exploitation and misery by looting their enterprises. By the early 1780s, the recovery of the industry was achieved, and the government took steps to increase wages and travel allowances to ensure the compliance of ascribed peasants.<sup>16</sup> It remains unclear whether this crucial event led to an intensification of banditry, as local historians simply depict the level of criminality in the region as endemic throughout the second half of the century, with large and small gangs sporadically teaming up and assailing enterprises, trade ships, and villagers. In May 1776, for example, a large party of brigands raided and looted the villages of Sludskaia and Ust'-Kos'va, as well as targeting the Visim Private Factory. In 1789, Perm officials interrogated two military deserters who had stolen loads of provisions and tools from several villages. After teaming up with five fugitives, they robbed two noblemen who happened to be napping on a small island about 15 versts from Perm, shooting and killing one of them in the process.<sup>17</sup> Widely known, such stories of seemingly successful

14. For the discussion of the decrees, see D. Tal'berg, *Nasil'stvennoe pokhishchenie imushchestva po russkomu pravu (razboi i grabezh), istoriko-dogmaticheskoe izsledovanie* (St. Petersburg, 1880). At the same time, the state was more successful in curbing the level of crime in major towns: St. Petersburg, Moscow, and provincial capitals. Denise Eeckaute, "Les brigands en Russie du XVIIe au XIXe siècle: Mythe et réalité," *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* (1954–) 12, no. 3 (September 1965): 174–76. The emergence of brigandage in areas with poor administrative control was also common in Europe and Asia. John Robert McNeill, *The Mountains of the Mediterranean World: An Environmental History* (Cambridge, Eng., 1992), 118; Robert J. Antony, "Peasants, Heroes, and Brigands: The Problems of Social Banditry in Early-Nineteenth-Century South China," *Modern China* 15, no. 2 (April 1989): 123–48.

15. Aleksandr N. Radishchev, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, ed. N.K. Piksanov et al., vol. 3 (Moscow and Leningrad, 1952), 286–88.

16. Isabel de Madariaga, *Russia in the Age of Catherine the Great* (New Haven, 1981), 467–68; Paul Avrich, *Russian Rebels, 1600–1800* (New York, 1972), 181–254; A.I. Andrushchenko, *Krest'ianskaia voina 1773–1775 gg. na Iaike, v Priural'e, na Urale i v Sibiri* (Moscow, 1969).

17. GAPK, f. 12, op. 1, d. 64 (Delo o permskikh razboinikakh Fedule Gnusove, Aver'iane Shatove i Nefede Sorokine). The extent of criminality on the Kama River and in the region

and sometimes popular brigands could have served as inspiration for persons like the Bashagurovs, who could also try their luck at acquiring riches.

Regardless of the intention, the Bashagurovs initially had limited opportunities for engaging in robberies but rather focused on simple survival by procuring food and establishing a base. Their native places near Perm were the safest since there they could seek help from relatives and acquaintances. One afternoon, they arrived in Stepanovo village to visit Ivan's father-in-law. As he was absent, they talked with his wife, Irina Sannikova, and asked her for some bread and eggs. The testimonies differ on whether she helped them but agree that they left the village in a hurry due to the fear of being discovered. A couple of versts away, fortune smiled on them: in a mill, they found a sack and filled it with over half a *pud* (about 8 kgs) of rye flour. Afterward, they set up a camp in a forest near Ust'-Rechka and ate hot mush until they exhausted the food reserves.<sup>18</sup> (Map 1)

Their life in the forest was quite uneventful during the remaining part of the summer and early fall of 1789. One day, Ivan purchased a musket and a bit of gunpowder from a peasant they encountered wandering in the forest. Obtaining food remained a high priority. They typically ventured into nearby villages, well familiar to them from the past. One night, the brothers sneaked inside their sister's house and made off with a bucket of raspberries and two hands of pork. As the harvest season was in full swing, they often came to the fields near Ust'-Rechka to meet with Stepan's father-in-law, Andrei Sokolov, and nephews, Ivan and Nikolai Bashagurov, who supplied them with bread and suggested hiding deeper in the forest because of the ongoing searches. On one occasion, the brothers stopped by the house of Stepan's wife, Daria Bashagurova, who gave them some bread and promised to bring more, yet revealed their presence to other villagers, who quickly gathered to arrest the fugitives. The brothers managed to shake off the pursuers and reunite in their hideout yet deemed it too risky to remain there any longer.

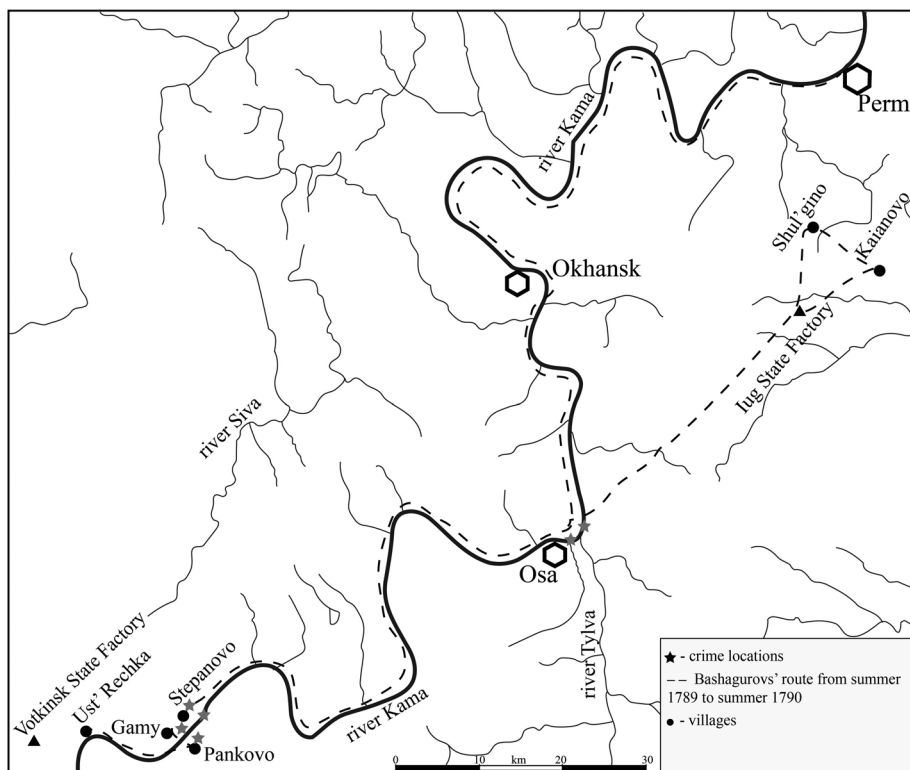
As the weather was turning cold in the late fall, the brothers decided to leave their shelter and spend the winter by taking up work as wage laborers. They hid the musket in a tree hollow and went to Ivan Bashagurov's acquaintance, Ivan Kolmogorov, a factory serviceman (*zavodskoi sluzhitelj'*) at the Iug Factory. Kolmogorov's assurances that they were local peasants, not run-aways, helped the brothers secure employment as miners in the same factory, where they stayed for approximately three-four weeks, with a salary of five kopeks per day. Afterward, the brothers wandered around local villages performing work for anyone willing to hire them.<sup>19</sup>

---

in the eighteenth century has led local scholars to compare it with the situations in the Don and Volga regions where the so-called *vol'nitsa*, (freebooters), filled with cossacks and fugitives, greatly troubled both the authorities and ordinary residents. V.A. Vesnovskii, "Kamskaia vol'nitsa," *Permskii kraevedcheskii sbornik* 3 (1927): 64; A.A. Dmitriev, *Ocherki iz istorii gubernskogo goroda Permi (s osnovaniia poseleniia do 1845 goda)* (Perm, 1889), 1–2; N.N. Blinov, *Sarapul i Srednee Prikam'e: byloe i sovremennoe*, 2nd edition (Sarapul, 1908), 30.

18. GAPK, f. 12, op. 1, d. 82, l. 59; f. 177, op. 3, d. 444, ll. 6 ob.-8.

19. GAPK, f. 12, op. 1, d. 82, ll. 59–61; f. 177, op. 3, d. 444, ll. 9–9 ob. In the latter half of the eighteenth century, hiring wage laborers became a common practice among



**Map 1: Bashagurov's Deeds in Perm Viceregency**

The transition from theft and hiding to a semblance of law-abiding livelihood, however, did not mean that the brothers turned away from their criminal intentions; instead, this was a common strategy among brigands—or prospective brigands in the Bashagurov's case—to wait through the winter when rivers were not navigable and pirating impossible. As noted by the pre-revolutionary scholar Daniil Mordovtsev in his study of brigandage on the Volga, bandits did whatever they could to blend in following successful raids after the season was over. Some used stolen passports to assume different identities and names, while others sought employment in villages and commercial settlements, or rented rooms in private houses and inns. But when the ice was about to break and river caravans depart, brigands would receive a call from their atamans (gang leaders) to resume raiding.<sup>20</sup>

In the spring of 1790, the time was ripe to engage in serious criminal activities. Like on the Volga, brigandage began after the ice melted on the Kama, allowing navigation for ships and boats docked in town ports and

peasants in the Urals, and, even without proper documents, the brothers likely did not seem different from many others who sought work. A.A. Preobrazhenskii et al., eds., *Istoriia Urala s drevneishikh vremen do 1861 g.* (Moscow, 1989), 308–10.

20. Mordovtsev, "Ponizovaia vol'nitsa. I-IV," 14.

rural quays.<sup>21</sup> The Bashagurovs broke into several village houses, getting their hands on muskets, gunpowder, provisions, and clothes, and brought the goods to their new hideout near the town of Osa. There, they attacked a ship sailing down the river but found nothing except ten loaves of bread. They had more luck the following week. Four more ships that they robbed brought not only fish and bread but also fifty rubles and a small cannon, which was later found to be defective and sunk. Their latest exploits did not remain unnoticed for long. Peasant teams began scouring the forests and countryside, and sentries were set along the main roads and at quays. According to Ivan, in order to evade capture, the brothers suddenly decided to travel to St. Petersburg to enroll in the army and “beg forgiveness for their crimes.”<sup>22</sup>

The court files contain no explanation for the fugitives’ mystifying decision to undertake such a lengthy journey, as the distance between Osa and St. Petersburg ranged from 1,500 to over 2,000 kilometers depending upon the chosen route. Nor is it clear why they believed that they would be permitted to join the army. It appears, however, that they learned about a decree promulgated on September 6, 1790. It included special provisions for those state peasants and townsfolk who, in 1788, volunteered to fight in the war against Sweden, and who, in 1790, were offered to choose whether to remain in service or return to their former lives.<sup>23</sup> It is noteworthy that the Bashagurovs viewed an opportunity for the grim, dangerous, and lifelong soldiering as more attractive than their current occupation and an ever-looming risk of imprisonment. Albeit highly unwanted for most people, military service would result in gaining legal status for the brothers and a chance for a different life.

An additional complication to their plan was the absence of passports required for everyone who wanted to travel far from their places of residence. From its introduction in the early 1720s, the passport gradually became an essential document, without which securing employment farther than thirty versts from one’s official locality was illegal. Since the passport contained a description of its bearer—including a place of origin, social status, and appearance—provincial officials or soldiers, posted at checkpoints along main roads and town gates, had an obligation to verify whether itinerant workers had travel documents in their possession, and detain those who did not. The same responsibility was extended to ordinary townspeople and peasants who encountered unknown persons on the road or considered letting them stay in their houses.<sup>24</sup>

21. Blinov, *Sarapul i Srednee Prikam’e*, 30.

22. GAPK, f. 14, op. 1, d. 42 (Delo po raportu Okhanskogo nizhnego zemskogo suda o razboinike Stepane Bashagurove), ll. 114–115; f. 12, op. 1, d. 82, ll. 62.

23. *PSZ*, vol. 23, no. 16,903 (September 6, 1790). The 1788 decrees with calls for volunteers: *PSZ*, vol. 22, no. 16,681 (July 1, 1788); no. 16,682 (July 3, 1788); no. 16,695 (August 3, 1788).

24. On passports and undocumented workers in the eighteenth century, see Simon Franklin, “Printing and Social Control in Russia 1: Passports,” *Russian History* 37, no. 3 (2010): 208–37; V.G. Chernukha, *Pasport v Rossii, 1719–1917* (St. Petersburg, 2007), ch. 1; Alison K. Smith, “False Passports, Undocumented Workers, and Public (Dis)Order in Late-Eighteenth-Century Russia,” *Journal of Social History* 53, no. 3 (Spring 2020): 742–62.



The absence of passports, either authentic or counterfeit, prompted the Bashagurovs to avoid highways after they set out for Kazan, their first destination. Instead, they walked through forests and by devious roads and apparently felt safe enough to use their real names when inquired by peasants encountered on the way. The only sensible precaution the brothers took was to conceal their fugitive status and to claim to be state peasants from Okhansk district until they arrived in the Volga region. At this point, however, Ivan and Stepan's stories began to diverge (table 1).

**Table 1. Alternative Stories of the Brothers' Travels in the Volga Region**

Ivan's version	Stepan's version
<p><i>Without passports</i>, they reached Kazan where they stayed <i>for two weeks</i> in a house, owned by Sergeant Ivan Filippov's wife in Zasypkina sloboda, to whom they claimed to have been barge haulers. Therefrom, they went <i>up the Volga</i> to the Bakaldy quay where they loaded merchant ships for three days. Then, they were hired <i>knowingly as fugitives</i> for a minimum wage by Grigorii Driablov, a merchant, to work on his ship with apples sailing to Nizhnii Novgorod. There, they collected their wages, stayed for a week, and went to Moscow on foot.<sup>25</sup></p>	<p>They arrived in Kazan in late August where they lived for <i>a week</i>. They joined a group of unknown barge haulers, sailing <i>down the Volga</i> to Simbirsk. There, for <i>a week</i>, they lived and did housework in a house of a pharmacist by the name of Ivan who <i>neither knew about their fugitive status nor asked for their passports</i>, as many such barge haulers were in Simbirsk then. After collecting their salary of three rubles, they sailed to Saratov, whence they went to Moscow on foot.<sup>26</sup></p>

To a scholar well acquainted with similar archival sources, both versions appear plausible. Accounts of itinerant workers in the Volga region testify to the existence of a fluid workspace with laborers frequently changing and performing short-term jobs, including fishing, lumberjacking, factory work, barge hauling, and harvesting crops.<sup>27</sup> This observation, nevertheless, does not explain the reason why the brothers provided such strikingly different accounts, in which nothing matched, from the persons the brothers interacted with to their travel routes along the Volga. Perhaps, they sought to confuse the investigators who would need to verify both accounts. At the same time, Ivan's version points out another possibility. As he mentioned the brothers' hosts and employers by name, he might have wanted to take revenge for offenses that the Bashagurovs had experienced during their travels. According to eighteenth-century laws, any person implicated in assisting fugitives had to be

25. GAKP, f. 12, op. 1, d. 82, l. 15.

26. GAKP, f. 177, op. 3, d. 444, ll. 9 ob.-10.

27. N.R. Romanov, "Ocherki po istorii burlachestva v XVIII veke i pervoi polovine XIX veka: po arkhivnym materialam Chuvashii," in *Zapiski Nauchno-issledovatel'skogo instituta iazyka, literatury i istorii Chuvashskoi ASSR*, vol. 2, 1949, 55–89; P.A. Preobrazhenskii, "Beglye krest'iane Samarskogo kraia v XVIII veke," in P.S. Kabytov and E.L. Dubman, eds., *"Zolotoe desiatiletie" samarskogo kraevedeniia*, vol. 5 (Samara, 2008), 121–34.

examined and punished for harboring if proven guilty. Oddly, however, the courts completely ignored this part of the Bashagurovs' story, leaving unclarified their journey in the Volga region.

In Moscow, the brothers stayed in a couple of inns for about five weeks, carrying out chores for the inhabitants of Taganskaia Sloboda and Tverskaya Street. Therefrom, they took the main road and made their way to St. Petersburg where they arrived in November 1790 and rented lodging in an inn. After staying for about three weeks, they could no longer ignore the inn owner's growing suspicions and requests to show passports. Afraid of being arrested, they voluntarily presented themselves to the St. Petersburg Police Department (*Uprava blagochiniia*), where they told a story that seems to have been prepared well in advance:

They were Stepan and Ivan Bashagurov, state peasants from Okhansk district, Perm viceregency. While working on barges with iron, they accidentally lost their printed passports, issued to them by the Okhansk District Treasury. Then, they were captured by force and deployed to fight against the Swedish army [in the war of 1788–1790].<sup>28</sup>

Although there was no direct reference to the decree of 1790 on the opportunity to continue military service after the war, the brothers made an effort to present themselves as eligible for this option. Contrary to their hopes, the Police Department ordered their return to Perm for a further investigation into their status, thus bringing to naught the Bashagurovs' plans to begin new lives in the army. The brothers' attempt likely failed because of Ivan's split nostrils, pointing out his suspicious character to the authorities. Although over time this facial deficiency could become less noticeable for common people, government officials were trained to read the bodies of suspects like a map and recognize the signs distinguishing criminals from law-abiding people, such as scars from flogging, branding, or ripped nostrils.<sup>29</sup> The latter distinctively marked a person as someone who was sentenced to hard labor.

During the Great Lent of 1791, while being escorted to Perm, the brothers managed to break their shackles and escape. They fled to Kazan where they labored as lumberjacks for a while, but in early May, they moved back to their native places. After picking up the weapons hidden in their last shelter, they visited Gerasim Mikhailov, their brother-in-law, who gave them some bread, a knife, a flint, and a boat. In addition, the Bashagurovs recruited two more people to join their gang: Gerasim's son, Andrei Mikhailov, and a tax collector from Ust'-Rechka, Ivan Sabin.<sup>30</sup> Now, their preparations for brigandage were over.

Within several days, the bandits raided two boats, but their gains were not substantial: some bread and other foodstuffs. It seems that Mikhailov and Sabin left the gang after these miserable exploits and were soon replaced by three "unknown fugitive recruits." The brigands' attacks on three more boats proved a success, allowing them to come away with 170 rubles, piles of clothes, wine, and provisions, as well as four passports. Unfortunately for the

28. GAPK, f. 14, op. 1, d. 42, ll. 115–116 ob.; f. 12, op. 1, d. 82, ll. 62–62 ob.

29. E.V. Anisimov, *Dyba i knut: Politicheskii sysk i russkoe obshchestvo v XVIII veke* (Moscow, 1999), 401, 502, 578.

30. GAPK, f. 177, op. 3, d. 455, ll. 12–13; d. 444, ll. 11 ob.-12 ob.

Bashagurovs, the passports were useless since they contained descriptions matching neither of them, prompting the brothers to return them to the owners. One night, they robbed a boat with two sleeping persons yet decided not to free them until getting drunk together.<sup>31</sup> The gang scored a more significant booty when they spotted a boat, owned by Prokopii Baranov, a merchant from Solikamsk, from whom they extorted 380 rubles and many personal belongings. The brigands' very last attack was disappointing: "On a ship with salt, there was nothing good but only one *pud* of oats (16.38 kgs) and five loaves of bread." Afterward, the brigands agreed to disband and, having divided and hidden their plunder, parted ways. The brothers planned to find some work but first decided to visit their acquaintance, Ivan Kolmogorov, in whose house one of them was caught soon after their arrival. The arrest of the other occurred several weeks later, thus bringing an end to the Bashagurovs' exploits.<sup>32</sup>

Out of this story, the Bashagurovs come out as bandits whose behavior was largely opportunistic and resemble *bricoleurs* who acted depending on what they could find at hand.<sup>33</sup> Regardless of their original intention, they could not begin robberies for almost a year, preferring to concentrate on hiding and procuring food to survive. It was enough for them to learn about the chance to enroll in the army to embark on a journey to St. Petersburg without any certainty of success. Except for one or two attacks at the end, their gains from robberies were also unremarkable, containing mostly foods and clothes, and rarely expensive goods, an observation that underscores a pattern of actions driven by immediate chances, not by a well-designed plan. Moreover, the brothers' exploits contain no indication of personal vendettas against "class enemies," as Soviet scholars would call them. As former ascribed state peasants, they likely had no motive to specifically target noble landlords and factory owners. Nor did they exhibit hostility toward state overseers who administered the Votkinsk Factory. Rather, they concentrated their efforts on raiding random boats with the hope that some of them would be carrying riches.

Their accounts portray banditry as a seasonal occupation that fitted well within the flexible routine of an itinerant worker.<sup>34</sup> When the river navigation and trade were on the wane, the Bashagurovs could not afford to wait idly by but had to search for work to earn money. Doing so was also an opportunity to conceal themselves and blend in with thousands of other wage laborers—both legal and illegal—who roamed the Urals, the Volga region, and other parts of

31. Stolen passports were especially valuable among brigands as they served to ensure one's safety during the period of criminal inactivity. Mordovtsev, "Ponizovaia vol'nitsa. I-IV," 22.

32. GAPK, f. 12, op. 1, d. 82, ll. 62–63; f. 177, op. 3, d. 444, ll. 13–14.

33. *Bricoleurs* rarely anticipate or control the outcome of their plans and decisions and have to make sense of unanticipated results. Blok, *Honour and Violence*, 1.

34. In their studies of other parts of the world, a number of scholars came to similar conclusions about seasonal and transitory nature of brigandage. Antony, "Peasants, Heroes, and Brigands," 134; Koliopoulos, *Brigands with a Cause*, 239; Uğur Bayraktar, "From Salary to Resistance: Mobility, Employment, and Violence in Dibra, 1792–1826," *Middle Eastern Studies* 54, no. 6 (2018): 878–900.

Russia in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.<sup>35</sup> Regardless of the absence of passports and suspicious physical appearance, the brothers rarely seemed to struggle with finding employment and getting paid as long as they remained on the move and avoided tarrying in one place for too long. Such behavior was based on exploiting the weakness of the state's ability to track and control the geographic mobility of its population at a micro level, especially in the regions distant from the imperial capitals. For criminals and other fugitives alike, mobility was thus the key to their very existence.

### **“The Harborers Are More Harmful Than the Worst of the Bandits”**

For eighteenth-century Russia, the eradication of thievery and brigandage continually figured as a high-priority objective. The extreme sensitivity of this matter was dictated by the need to maintain peace in rural and urban areas and uphold the existing social order. At different times, the government experimented with the creation of special legal and police organs, dispatches of investigators, and the assignment of responsibility for surveillance to provincial officials.<sup>36</sup> All these measures sought to eliminate crime at two levels: the apprehension of bandits and the “discouragement” of others from offering them refuge and assistance. After bandits were captured, an investigation therefore aimed not only to determine their guilt but also to reveal all those who were somehow involved in their criminal exploits.

Establishing the Bashagurovs' culpability turned out to be a simple matter. Under several interrogations, they freely recounted the sites, approximate time, and manner of the committed crimes, and, in doing so, provided sufficient information to the courts. In addition to many robberies and thefts committed between 1789 and 1791, the brothers were charged for their past crimes: Stepan's involvement in the murder of two Tatars and Ivan's participation in a robbery.<sup>37</sup> Before pronouncing a sentence and closing the case, however, the investigation had to verify specific pieces of information, stated by the Bashagurovs, which proved to be a more challenging task.

A peculiar characteristic of criminal law was that the government was concerned more with the accomplices than with the criminals themselves. “When bandits or thieves are caught,”—stated Catherine II in the decree of 1763—“first and foremost, [judges] should endeavor with great diligence to use their depositions to discover those who sheltered them in the places in

35. Romanov, “Ocherki po istorii burlachestva”; Boris B. Gorshkov, “Serfs on the Move: Peasant Seasonal Migration in Pre-Reform Russia, 1800–61,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 1, no. 4 (Fall 2000): 627–56; Andrey V. Gornostaev, “Peasants ‘on the Run’: State Control, Fugitives, Social and Geographic Mobility in Imperial Russia, 1649–1796” (PhD diss., Georgetown University, 2020), 143–97 and 237–78.

36. On different approaches the Russian government used to combat crime, see Aristov, *Razboiniki i beglye*; Tal'berg, *Nasil'stvennoe pokhishchenie*, 96–100; J. L. H. Keep, “Bandits and the Law in Muscovy,” *The Slavonic and East European Review* 35, no. 84 (December 1956): 201–22; Eeckaute, “Brigands en Russie.”

37. On distinctions between different types of crime, see *PSZ*, vol. 21, no. 15,147 (April 3, 1781). G.O. Babkova, “Pravovaia mysl': Predstavleniia o prestuplenii i nakazanii,” in I.N. Danilevskii, A. Kamenskii, V.V. Shelokhaev, and V.V. Zhuravlev, eds., *Obshchestvennaia mysl' Rossii: S drevneishikh vremen do serediny XX veka*, vol. 2 (Moscow, 2020), 218–97.

which they were hiding, because such wrongdoers, the harborers, are more harmful than the worst of the bandits.” The eradication of accomplices, consequently, would lead to the disappearance of bandits whose existence would be extremely difficult without places of refuge.<sup>38</sup> By this logic, all persons implicated by the Bashagurovs as harborers, employers, or suppliers of food-stuffs had to be examined to identify their roles to make sure that no offender would go unpunished.

Interrogations were to proceed according to judicial procedure, which aimed to ensure the just nature of resolutions in criminal cases, and which was based on extant laws, designed to eliminate abuses and unjustified punishments. In their work, judges were guided by the theory of formal proofs, supposed to help them achieve “objective” justice. The most complete and trustworthy type of evidence was a voluntary confession, while witness testimonies or unofficial written documents were incomplete by themselves and had to be supplemented by additional proofs to carry weight. Likewise, circumstantial evidence (*uliki*), such as material objects, was of dubious value unless a definitive link could be traced to the crime. Crucially, the judge did not possess interpretive power but had to follow the words of the law to ascertain the suspect’s guilt or innocence. When in doubt and unable to find an answer in the statutes and decrees, the judge needed to turn to a higher authority for clarification.<sup>39</sup>

According to the Statute for Guberniia Administration of 1775, several governmental bodies, acting consecutively, considered every serious crime. This procedure also meant that the accused provided two or three testimonies, allowing the judge to expose the discrepancies in one’s account and clarify them with questions to obtain a complete and accurate account.<sup>40</sup> In the instances of Ivan and Stepan Bashagurov, their first depositions were taken in the places of their arrest: the Iug factory office and Abramovka village, respectively. Because these locations fell under the jurisdiction of different district authorities, the brothers’ exploits were examined separately: Ivan’s in Perm and Stepan’s in Okhansk. In practice, it meant that interrogees had several opportunities to present their accounts in a different light. Another notable measure devised to improve the examination of criminal cases was their initial conduct on-site, not in administrative centers. Responsible for dealing with cases ranging from misdemeanors to robberies, the lower land

38. PSZ, vol. 16, no. 11,750 (February 10, 1763), art. 4.

39. Richard S. Wortman, *The Development of a Russian Legal Consciousness* (Chicago, 1976), 10–11, 15; Ekaterina Pravilova, “Truth, Facts, and Authenticity in Russian Imperial Jurisprudence and Historiography,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 21, no. 1 (Winter 2020): 9–11; Oleg Anatol’evich Omel’chenko, *Vlast’ i zakon v Rossii XVIII veka: Issledovaniia i ocherki* (Moscow, 2004), 189–90.

40. PSZ, vol. 20, no. 14,392 (November 7, 1775), arts. 110–113. Oleg Anatol’evich Omel’chenko, “*Zakonnaia monarkhiia*” *Ekateriny II: Prosveshchennyi absolutizm v Rossii* (Moscow, 1993), 280–83; V.A. Voropanov, *Sud i pravosudie v provintsii Rossiiskoi imperii vo vtoroi polovine XVIII v. (na primere oblastei Povolzh’ia, Urala, Zapadnoi Sibiri i Kazakhstana)*. *Monografiia* (Moscow, 2016). According to the decree of 1797, harborers of bandits were recognized among the most dangerous criminals, along with murderers and persons guilty of *lèse-majesté* and inciting rebellion. PSZ, vol. 24, no. 18,140 (September 13, 1797).

court (*nizhnii zemskii sud*) was to proceed with a preliminary investigation at the crime scene, where it would have immediate access to bandits, their accomplices, and witnesses, thus reducing the total time required to finish the case.<sup>41</sup>

In June 1791, after Ivan Bashagurov's capture, the Perm Lower Land Court traveled to the Iug Factory where it launched an investigation of suspected harborers. In December 1789, the brothers had met two seigneurial peasants, Dmitrii Denisov and Aleksei Selivanov, residing about ten versts away from the factory in Shul'gino village. According to Ivan, they were well aware of the brothers' fugitive status yet agreed anyway to hire them to grind flour. Four weeks later, on Christmas Eve, the peasants rewarded the Bashagurovs with grain alcohol (*khlebnoe vino*) for their work "and told them that they distilled such vodka in a barn on a thrashing floor in the winter and by a stream in the summer." Earlier, the brothers themselves had noticed the distilling equipment in the barn but had kept silent about it. On Christmas Day morning, the Bashagurovs put on skis and left the house while their hosts were still asleep. Soon thereafter, however, the peasants caught up with them, threatening to turn them in if they did not surrender their belongings. "In fear, they gave away two bags. . . and a musket, and then the peasants released the Bashagurovs."<sup>42</sup>

Under questioning, the peasants not only completely denied any prior acquaintance with the brothers but also emphasized their efforts to catch them. According to Denisov, on the night of March 20, 1790, he heard how "unknown thieves" were trying to break a window to enter his house. Without hesitation, he leaped out the window and ran to the nearest village "for his own salvation" and to alert other peasants. Together with Selivanov, he then chased after the thieves, who, having spotted the pursuers, dropped their belongings "to reduce weight" and managed to escape. In due time, Denisov and Selivanov reported the incident to village authorities, and now emphasized to the court that the Bashagurovs attempted to implicate them "out of spite."<sup>43</sup>

The court found itself in a typical situation for the second half of the eighteenth century when both parties presented plausible versions of events. As depicted by the Bashagurovs, the peasants were potentially guilty not only of harboring fugitives but also of illegally distilling spirits. Although the Statute on Spirits of 1781 permitted people of all ranks to produce "vodka" from already distilled alcohol, distillation itself was forbidden, and any violations had to be brought to the attention of the authorities.<sup>44</sup> All of this does not explain what the Bashagurovs would gain from the denunciation of the peasants, and, perhaps, some personal motives played a role in Ivan's inclusion

41. PSZ, vol. 20, no. 14,392 (November 7, 1775), arts. 224, 229, 232.

42. Interestingly, this episode is absent in Stepan's depositions. GAPK, f. 12, op. 1, d. 82, ll. 14–14 ob., 66 ob.

43. GAPK, f. 12, op. 1, d. 82, ll. 23 ob.-24.

44. At the same time, people of all ranks were allowed to brew beer and mead. PSZ, vol. 21, no. 15,231 (September 17, 1781), arts. 52, 54, 56, 103, 104. In this period, vodka was understood as the product obtained after the second distillation of alcohol. The term "vodka" broadly denoted alcoholic beverages based on wheat, grapes, or fruit. *Slovar' Akademii Rossiiskoi* (St. Petersburg, 1789), 802–3.

of this episode in his testimony. For the Perm officials, though, the story of distillation deserved no attention at all as other factors indicated that Denisov and Selivanov were honest, law-abiding subjects. In addition to corroborating statements provided by their wives and neighbors, the report on the incident was viewed as final proof of their innocence.<sup>45</sup>

Other key figures who came up in Ivan Bashagurov's testimony were Ivan Kolmogorov and Petr Akbashev. Suspected of assisting fugitives, Kolmogorov was Bashagurov's acquaintance from the past, a circumstance that encouraged the brothers to seek his assistance in the fall of 1789. Upon arriving at his house, they approached him cautiously, not revealing their illegal status, and said that they were heading to Perm to bid farewell to their other brother who had been recently drafted into the army. Two days later, at night, the Bashagurovs left for Kaianovo village to find work at a mine, managed by Petr Akbashev, a Bashkir industrialist. Although they did not meet him in person, his workers explained that Akbashev only hired persons with passports. The brothers returned to Kolmogorov and this time confessed to being fugitives. "Feeling pity for them," Kolmogorov personally took them to Akbashev, introducing them as local state peasants, and "intentionally said that he kept their passports in his house" in response to Akbashev's inquiry about their documents. This clarification sufficed to get them hired. Several weeks later, the brothers received their pay and returned to Kolmogorov, whose house became their base until late spring.<sup>46</sup>

The depositions given by Kolmogorov and Akbashev revealed notable contradictions in how they remembered the events. Whereas the former confirmed Bashagurov's story almost verbatim, the latter vehemently denied ever employing the brothers since they failed to show passports. A series of face-to-face confrontments (*ochnye stavki*) between Bashagurov, Kolmogorov, and Akbashev also yielded no result as all of them stood by their previous testimonies. With respect to Akbashev's role, the court was at an impasse and unable to identify whose testimony was credible. In the absence of other evidence, the only investigative mechanism available was the conduct of a summary search (*poval'nyi obysk*) in Akbashev's home village of Kaianovo.<sup>47</sup> The idea behind a summary search was quite elementary. If at least half of the neighbors provided positive references, the suspect was declared innocent. Having less than half pointed out some shady goings-on and the need to continue investigating, Akbashev had nothing to worry about as eighteen Kaianovo residents—all who were asked—assured the court of his good character.<sup>48</sup>

While Akbashev was proclaimed innocent, Kolmogorov's testimonies spoke of his involvement. Under an ensuing interrogation at the Perm District Court (*uezdnyi sud*), however, the suspect had a change of heart. Now, he denied ever being aware that the Bashagurovs were fugitives and helping them find employment. Instead, he assumed them to be state peasants from

45. GAPK, f. 12, op. 1, d. 82, ll. 30–30 ob., 78; f. 177, op. 3, d. 455, ll. 18 ob.-19 ob.

46. GAPK, f. 177, op. d. 455, ll. 14–14 ob.; f. 12, op. 1, d. 82, ll. 12 ob.-14.

47. GAPK, f. 177, op. d. 455, ll. 15 ob.-18, 23–24 ob.

48. Oddly, the Perm Lower Land Court also dismissed an excerpt from Stepan Bashagurov's testimony which clearly implicated Akbashev as the brothers' employer. GAPK, f. 177, op. d. 455, ll. 20–20 ob.

the neighboring Osa district who were permitted to work outside their places of residence. During their stay in his house, neither he nor his wife, Vasilisa, deemed the brothers suspicious as they appeared no different from other itinerant laborers who occasionally lodged in their house.

Another matter that the court wished to examine pertained to the discovery of a five-ruble *assignatsiia* (a paper bill) in Vasilisa's possession. The brothers seized many paper bills during a robbery on the Kama, and a similar *assignatsiia* was found during Ivan Bashagurov's body search. Vasilisa initially claimed that she received the bill from the brothers as payment for their stay in her house, but she later retracted this statement, arguing that it had been given under torture, an investigative method prohibited in 1774. Instead, she maintained that her husband legally earned the *assignatsiia* for coking coal about four years ago.<sup>49</sup>

The Kolmogorovs appear to have nearly convinced the Perm District Court of their ignorance regarding the brothers' criminal exploits, but the final consideration of their case at the Perm Criminal Chamber (*palata ugolovnogo suda*) was far less favorable.<sup>50</sup> First, the *assignatsiia* found on Vasilisa dated to 1790, and hence her husband could not have earned it four years ago. The judge also refused to believe their statement of ignorance, observing that the split nostrils on Ivan Bashagurov's face were an evident marker of a questionable person that was impossible to overlook when letting him into their house. The Kolmogorovs' punishment for harboring bandits was harsh: fifty strikes of a knout and splitting the nostrils for Ivan, twenty-five strikes for Vasilisa, and exile to Irkutsk guberniia for hard labor for both.<sup>51</sup> As seen, the court succeeded in prosecuting the harborers only because of the existence of several pieces of circumstantial evidence in addition to their confession of housing the brothers for a short while, the combination of proofs that was lacking in the cases of other suspected accomplices.

In parallel with that of Ivan in Perm, the examination of Stepan's case was taking place at the Okhansk Lower Land Court. All those with whom the Bashagurovs interacted in the Okhansk district fell under its jurisdiction. Stepan's first interrogation revealed that three of the accomplices, all related by familial ties, resided in Stepanovo village: Ivan's mother-in-law, Irina Sannikova, and their nephews, Ivan and Nikolai Bashagurov, who supplied the fugitives with bread and warned them about searches. But due to their persistent denials and the absence of proof, the court soon acquitted them of the charges.<sup>52</sup>

49. The decree of 1774 that banned torture was issued secretly. It remains unclear whether Vasilisa was aware of it, but she stressed that the previous interrogator had tied her hands and slapped her cheeks many times. GAPK, f. 177, op. d. 455, ll. 8–13, 31–33 ob., 34 ob.; f. 12, op. 1, d. 82, ll. 65–66, 70.

50. The Perm District Court recommended that the Kolmogorovs be punished for harboring fugitive peasants, not bandits. Albeit still a transgression, harboring fugitive peasants incurred a lesser punishment of lashing with a whip for men and women and forced military draft for men under sixty years old. PSZ, vol. 14, no. 10,233 (May 13, 1754), art. 11.

51. GAPK, f. 12, op. 1, d. 82, ll. 70–76; f. 177, op. 3, d. 455, ll. 64–66 ob.

52. GAPK, f. 177, op. 3, d. 444, ll. 18, 24 ob.



Okhansk officials had more questions for Daria Bashagurova, Stepan's wife, who lived in Ust'-Rechka. According to her testimony, she handed rye pies to the brothers and promised to fetch some bread from her neighbors, but she used this excuse as a pretext to summon help from other peasants. At the time, most men were tilling the fields some distance away from the village. Despite rushing back, they arrived too late as the brothers had already escaped into the forest, and nightfall prevented the peasant posse from continuing their search. Still, the court found her actions suspicious as she was expected to call for help without delay and not assist the bandits in any way. Daria successfully warded off doubts by stating that taking more conspicuous action would have certainly resulted in her death as the brothers had threatened to "cut her into small pieces."<sup>53</sup>

A remarkable aspect of Daria's description is how exemplarily Ust'-Rechka peasants acted. After her report, a peasant rode to the fields to notify the tenman (*desiatnik*). The tenman wasted no time organizing other villagers who then chased after the Bashagurovs. Throughout the eighteenth century, St. Petersburg repeatedly exhorted local authorities at all levels to put in great efforts to eradicate banditry. In rural areas, hundredmen (*sotskie*) and tenmen were responsible for maintaining daily surveillance and mobilizing local inhabitants to catch criminals. Bound by collective responsibility, ordinary peasants were similarly expected to act with haste when learning about bandits.<sup>54</sup> These measures were not just prescriptive but also educational, aiming to develop an understanding of proper, law-abiding conduct. While unsurprisingly not all peasants and rural authorities followed these orders, indeed sometimes benefiting through cooperation with brigands, others did their best to arrest such persons whenever possible.<sup>55</sup> What is startling in the Bashagurovs' case is that the peasants who sought to capture them were not strangers but relatives mostly with the same surname from the village where the brothers spent most of their lives (table 2).

In their depositions, Daria and her neighbors presented the brothers as dangerous for the local community, not shying away from stealing from their former neighbors or extorting foodstuffs. The peril posed by the Bashagurovs, therefore, outweighed any kinship ties the peasants had with them. Perhaps, even more influential were the prospects of corporal punishment and exile that Ust'-Rechka peasants would face for harboring and assisting criminals.<sup>56</sup> The Statute for the Guberniia Administration additionally imposed a monetary fine of one ruble on each village official who failed to notice the presence of unknown persons and therefore demonstrated "a careless attitude toward

53. GAPK, f. 177, op. 3, d. 444, ll. 7 ob.-8, 21 ob.-22, 27, 34 ob.-35.

54. When large bands operated in proximity to their villages, peasant officials had to inform the provincial authorities so that they could deploy military teams to combat crime. *PSZ*, vol. 15, no. 11,573 (June 14, 1762); vol. 16, no. 11,672 (October 2, 1762); vol. 20, no. 14,392 (November 7, 1775), art. 244. Mordovtsev, "Ponizovaia vol'nitsa," 5-6; Tal'berg, *Nasil'stvennoe pokhishchenie*, 95.

55. For several examples of how peasants assisted and struggled with bandits, see Gornostaev, "Peasants 'on the Run,'" 306-7.

56. *PSZ*, vol. 14, no. 10,650 (November 19, 1756); Eeckaute, "Brigands en Russie," 168.

**Table 2. The Bashagurovs' relatives under interrogation in Okhansk**

Stepanovo village	Ust'-Rechka village
Irina Sannikova—Ivan's mother-in-law	Daria Bashagurova—Stepan's wife
Andrei Sannikov—tenman, Ivan's father-in-law	Avdot'ia Bashagurova—neighbor, relation unknown
Ivan Bashagurov—nephew	Semen Bashagurov—neighbor, relation unknown
Nikolai Bashagurov—nephew	Isak Bashagurov—tenman, relation unknown

the general security” of the community and the state.<sup>57</sup> Because of their due diligence, the Ust'-Rechka village elder, hundredman, and tenman avoided this penalty, but their counterparts in Kaianovo village were proclaimed guilty of not apprehending the Bashagurovs, who had purchased some bread there more than once.<sup>58</sup>

Overall, the Bashagurovs' interactions with relatives, neighbors, and acquaintances were not straightforward. First, this social network was viewed as a pool of potential targets for theft. Out of the seven houses burgled, the brothers failed to identify their owners by names only in two instances. However, this list contained no single house from their home village of Ust'-Rechka, pointing out the brothers' more careful attitude toward their relatives. It seems that they obtained some support from several male relatives without whom surviving on the run for so long would be simply infeasible.<sup>59</sup> At the same time, women and village officials—including their immediate relations—viewed them adversely, showing no hesitation in trying to capture them.

Contrary to common assumptions in the historiography that portray peasants as generally sympathetic toward bandits,<sup>60</sup> village communities in the Urals were wary of outsiders and bandits who could pose a real danger to their wellbeing. Not only did they report their activities to the authorities, but also energetically participated in their apprehension. Several times, the Bashagurovs were forced to relocate and cease their activities because of the local peasants who were scouring the forests and setting sentries along the roads and at docks. In his study of popular songs and tales, Nikolai Aristov notes an evolution of popular sentiment toward brigands from friendly and

57. *PSZ*, vol. 20, no. 14,392 (November 7, 1775), art. 244. Issued in 1765, the decree imposed even steeper fines for harboring bandits in villages if peasants did so for over three days. It levied a charge of five kopecks on each registered male resident and five rubles on village elders, hundredmen, and tenmen. However, it is unclear whether the provision in the Statute for Guberniia Administration replaced this decree. *PSZ*, vol. 17, no. 12,455 (August 22, 1765),

58. *GAPK*, f. 12, op. 1, d. 82, ll. 77 ob.

59. On the Dutch frontier between 1730 and 1778, Blok notes that the very survival of bandits hinged upon their reliance on the networks of patrons, kinsfolk, and friends. Blok, *Honour and Violence*, 18, 22, 35.

60. Iurii Vladimirovich Got'e, *Istoriia oblastnogo upravleniia v Rossii ot Petra I do Ekateriny II*, vol. 1 (Moscow, 1913), 341–42; Mavrodin, *Krest'ianskaia voina*, 352. Hobsbawm makes a similar observation about village communities in other parts of the world but mostly supports it through the examination of selected tales and legends. Hobsbawm, *Bandits*.

supportive at the time of Stepan Razin (1670–71) to hostile by the second half of the ensuing century. Aristov explains the change by the bandits' indiscriminate attacks on all members of society, engendering deep resentment in peasants and leading them to aggressively act against criminals when necessary.<sup>61</sup> After all, there could be little solidarity with people whose very way of life depended on stealing food and goods from peasants.

### **“Receiving Satisfaction with the Return of the Stolen Goods”**

The courts in Perm and Okhansk prioritized the investigation of alleged accomplices to verify their testimonies against those given by the Bashagurovs, but they also had to address petitions by persons affected by the brothers, among whom the merchant Prokopii Baranov lost the most. Soon after the robbery had occurred, he reported that the bandits had taken 595 copper and paper rubles, numerous personal belongings, and a passport from him. The investigation, he hoped, would reveal the sites where the Bashagurovs had deposited the money and assist him “in receiving satisfaction with their return.” While the passport was discovered among Ivan’s possessions, the whereabouts of the money was much harder to determine. Under interrogation, Ivan stated that the total amount stolen was not 595 but 380 rubles, hence pointing out the difference of over 200 rubles with the merchant’s claim.<sup>62</sup> Then, he added that he had only ever carried five rubles and was unaware of the location of the remaining sum, as his brother had hidden it in a secret place somewhere along the Kama.

Interestingly, the Perm officials never bothered to compare Ivan’s testimony with that of his brother, a comparison that would yield significant discrepancies. According to Stepan, the brothers divided the “treasure” between a number of secret sites. In their last hideout on Stepanovskii Island, they “wrapped in canvas and put 150 copper rubles, two muskets, and powder flasks under a log, and then covered them with moss.” Another part was hidden in a fir grove. The third, containing weapons, was also wrapped in canvas and deposited in a swamp. The most contradictory remark was Stepan’s assurance that not he, but Ivan, was the one who handled Baranov’s money and should have had 170 paper rubles on him at the moment of capture. Stepan’s share of 110 paper rubles vanished when he was apprehended, but “he did not know why the Okhansk court did not receive them.” None of the people who had searched Stepan after his arrest could attest to ever seeing the money, however.<sup>63</sup> This turn of events was truly unfortunate for Baranov, as there was little hope that the stolen goods would be recovered. Dispatching soldiers to search for items somewhere along the Kama would also have been pointless. In the end, all the merchant received were ten paper rubles—five found

61. N.Ia. Aristov, *Ob istoricheskoi znachenii russkikh razboinich'ikh pesen* (Voronezh, 1875), 152–53.

62. In such cases, the government instructed provincial courts to believe the bandits, not the victims, because the latter tended to exaggerate their actual monetary loss in the hope not only to recover their capital but also to gain additional money from fines levied on bandits' harborers. PSZ, vol. 17, no. 12,455 (August 22, 1765).

63. GAPK, f. 177, op. 3, d. 444, ll. 4–4 ob., 15 ob.-18, 23–23 ob.

on Ivan and another five taken from the Kolmogorovs—some copper change, and any earnings the court would collect from the auction sale of the brothers' belongings.<sup>64</sup>

With the resolution of the merchant's case, the investigation came to a close. It is easy to imagine how frustrated Baranov must have been due to the definitive loss of a significant sum of money. This instance particularly highlights the deficiencies and naiveté—from a modern perspective—of the judicial procedure developed under Catherine II. Its focus on the priority of the law and the elimination of arbitrariness, achieved through the consecutive examination of each case in several courts, resulted in a too uncritical approach to suspects' testimonies, especially if they were given in different territorial districts and consequently treated as different cases.<sup>65</sup> Although it had access to both Ivan and Stepan Bashagurovs' files, the Perm Criminal Chamber never cross-checked them, nor sought to bring the brothers face to face to question the inconsistencies in their depositions. Required not to interpret but follow the letter of the law, the judge did not need to conduct an additional investigation—regardless of whether it could provide redress to affected parties like Baranov—since the criminal was already proven guilty.

As to the Bashagurovs, the final sentence pronounced in 1792 somewhat ironically returned them to the same path on which they had been before their escape. Exile and a life sentence to hard labor in Irkutsk guberniia awaited them but only after they suffered the appropriate punishment for their crimes: branding, splitting of the nostrils to the bone, and 200 lashes of the knout each.<sup>66</sup> We may only wonder whether they survived the punishment and reached their destination.

The investigation of the Bashagurovs' case was not a minor undertaking. Authorities in Perm and Okhansk questioned over twenty-five people, some implicated by the brothers and others delivered to confirm their supposed accomplices' testimonies. In total, it lasted for over ten months, from late June 1791 to mid-April 1792.<sup>67</sup> These efforts were of limited effectiveness, nonetheless. Among the individuals believed to be harboring fugitives, the courts proved the guilt of only the Kolmogorovs, whereas everyone else confirmed their innocence by denials or somewhat elaborate accounts of their law-abiding behavior. The evident limitation was the inability to use investigative methods that would go beyond the simple counterposing of the brothers' testimonies with those of the suspects. Apart from formal questioning, it appears that the courts had in fact little interest in pursuing their deeds further as depositions of bandits were generally perceived as slanderous and untrustworthy. As the Senate noted in 1784, the testimonies of criminals with a record of convictions carried weight in matters relevant to them personally,

64. GAPK, f. 12, op. 1, d. 82, ll. 3, 9 ob.-10 ob., 16–17, 63–64.

65. Omel'chenko, *Vlast' i zakon*, 189–90.

66. GAPK, f. 177, op. 3, d. 444, l. 70; d. 455, ll. 60 ob.-61.

67. Although missing in the available records, the Perm authorities also sent a request to their counterparts in the Viatka viceregency to investigate the roles of several of the brothers' accomplices, including Ivan Sabin, Gerasim and Andrei Mikhailov, who were under its jurisdiction.

but their “testimonies about other people, who were never in suspicion nor committed crimes, should not be accepted as they [the criminals] are persons without honor.”<sup>68</sup> Such a predisposition toward the interrogation of suspects and dependence on formal proofs resulted in a lack of flexibility in the judges’ ability to interpret contradictions and discrepancies during trials, thereby allowing culpable persons to avoid due punishment.<sup>69</sup>

Hindered by shortcomings in investigative techniques, the courts in Perm and Okhansk were unlikely to succeed in providing a completely truthful account of the Bashagurovs’ exploits and interactions with accomplices and harborers. Their task was more prosaic, namely, to gather evidence and depositions for a trial to be legitimately concluded. As a result, when perusing such records, we are limited by what the courts sought to uncover and transcribe or decided not to pursue. Why did the brothers tell different versions of their travels along the Volga? Can we genuinely believe in the innocence of the persons implicated by the Bashagurovs? In other words, what can we consider truthful, and why?

Even if these questions are unanswerable, for historical research, as argued by Carlo Ginzburg, specific “truths” are less important than enhancing our understanding of the context, social phenomena, and relationships between individuals.<sup>70</sup> The story of the Bashagurovs helps us grasp all these aspects of late-eighteenth-century Russian imperial life. Perhaps above all, their story illuminates the fluidity of boundaries between law-abiding and illicit social roles and occupations. Despite physical deficiencies and the absence of official documents, the brothers, with remarkable ease, switched to wage labor and traveled extensively within their native places and across the country. A similar observation pertains to other individuals who joined or supported the brothers’ gang at different times but later resumed work in factories or on the land. Such actions appear not as exceptions but as ordinary facets of everyday life for common people who exercised mobility and seized practical opportunities regardless of their membership in and limitations associated with a particular social group. After all, their lives were full of unexpected situations that they had to evaluate and adapt to, and only by paying attention to stories like that of the Bashagurovs can we come a bit closer to imagining the multifaceted world of bandits, seasonal migrants, and peasants.

Andrey V. Gornostaev is Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Toronto (Canada). His research focuses on the issues of social and transnational history in pre-emancipation imperial Russia. He is the author of several articles, published in *Journal of Social History* (2021), and *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* (2023); and is currently working on his first book, tentatively titled *Peasants on the Run: Resistance, Mobility, and Governance in Imperial Russia, 1649–1801*.

68. *PSZ*, vol. 22, no. 15,983 (April 17, 1784).

69. Catherine II devised several projects to address these shortcomings, but they remained unimplemented. Omel’chenko, *Zakonnaia monarkhiia*, 286–89.

70. Ginzburg, “Checking the Evidence,” 90.