

## ОТЕЧЕСТВЕННАЯ ИСТОРИЯ

Using Statistical Analysis to Study Life within  
Orthodox Convents*W. G. Wagner, K. Barnitt*

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Our previous article demonstrated how the internal reorganization of the Nizhnii Novgorod Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross interacted with developments in its external environment to transform the convent during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries from a small community composed mainly of older women, predominantly widows, that possessed limited means into a large and wealthy community that appealed overwhelmingly to young, unmarried, and disproportionately literate women, increasingly from unprivileged backgrounds. As our analysis of the trends in the convent's membership made clear, the decision—and for some women the ability—to enter the convent was strongly influenced by a woman's particular worldly status, circumstances, prospects, and location. Using statistical methods of analysis, the present article demonstrates that, once a woman had joined the community, considerations deriving from the community's internal values and needs outweighed these worldly attributes in shaping central aspects of life within the convent. In particular, neither social background nor the level of literacy influenced the progress of women through various stages of a monastic vocation, nor did social background generally have an impact on the assignment of obediences or elevation to positions of leadership. Rather, the assignment of obediences and appointment to leadership positions appear to have been based on the degree to which a woman's particular skills and abilities met the community's internal criteria and needs. This transcendence of worldly attributes and values within the community helps to explain its appeal during the late imperial period, especially for women from unprivileged

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social strata, whose actions in turn helped to transform the convent and adapt it to conditions of modernizing change.

*Keywords:* Russian Orthodox Church, Orthodox monasticism, Orthodox convents, female monasticism, monastic revival, Imperial Russia, Nizhnii Novgorod, statistical analysis.

## Использование статистических методов при изучении внутренней жизни православных женских монастырей

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В нашей предыдущей статье было показано, как внутренняя реорганизация Нижегородского Крестовоздвиженского женского монастыря была связана с внешними условиями, предопределившими его превращение из небольшого сообщества, состоящего в основном из пожилых женщин, преимущественно вдов, обладавших ограниченными средствами, в большое и богатое сообщество, которое по большей части состояло из молодых, незамужних, несоизмеримо более грамотных женщин, все чаще непривileгированного происхождения. Наш анализ тенденций членства в монастыре ясно показал, что решение, а для некоторых женщин способность вступить в монастырь сильно зависели от конкретного мирского статуса женщины, обстоятельств, перспектив и происхождения. На основе статистических методов в статье демонстрируется, что как только женщина присоединялась к монастырскому сообществу, соображения, вытекающие из его внутренних ценностей и потребностей, перевешивали мирские атрибуты при формировании центральных аспектов жизни в монастыре. В частности, ни социальное происхождение, ни уровень грамотности женщин не влияли на их духовное развитие и деятельность, на назначение послушаний или возвышение до руководящих должностей. Скорее, назначение послушаний и назначение на руководящие должности, по-видимому, были основаны на том, в какой степени особые навыки и способности женщины соответствовали внутренним критериям и потребностям монастырского сообщества. Эта трансцендентность мирских атрибутов и ценностей внутри сообщества помогает объяснить его привлекательность в поздний имперский период, особенно для женщин из непривилегированных социальных слоев, действия которых помогли, в свою очередь, преобразовать монастырь и адаптировать его к условиям модернизации.

*Ключевые слова:* Русская православная церковь, православное монашество, православные женские монастыри, женское монашество, возрождение монашества, имперская Россия, Нижний Новгород, статистические методы исторического анализа.

Our previous article demonstrated how the internal reorganization of the Nizhnii Novgorod Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross interacted with developments in its external environment to transform the convent during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries<sup>1</sup>. Over the course of this period, the convent was transformed from a small community composed mainly of older women, predominantly widows, that possessed limited

<sup>1</sup> *Wagner W. G., Barnitt K. A Quantitative Study of the Transformation of Female Orthodox Monasticism in Imperial Russia // Vestnik of Saint Petersburg University. History. 2017. Vol. 62, iss. 4. P. 751–776.*

means and played a modest role in the religious and cultural life of the city into a large and wealthy community that appealed overwhelmingly to young, unmarried, and disproportionately literate women, increasingly from unprivileged backgrounds, and provided a range of social and educational as well as religious services to the Orthodox population of the Nizhnii Novgorod region. As the trends in the convent's membership make clear, the decision—and for some women the ability—to enter the convent between the eighteenth century and 1917 was strongly influenced by a woman's particular worldly status, circumstances, prospects, and location. But once a woman had joined the community, as two sets of statistical analysis suggest, considerations deriving from the community's internal values and needs generally outweighed these worldly attributes in shaping central aspects of life within the convent, although this conclusion must remain tentative because of the indirect and limited nature of the evidence. This transcendence of worldly attributes and values within the community also helps to explain its transformation during the late imperial period.

The first set of analyses examines the effects of social background and of the level of literacy on the time that elapsed before novice and full vows were taken by all women *who entered* the convent between 1816–1856 and between 1866–1894 (and in the case of the level of literacy, also prior to 1816). The second set examines the effects of social background and of the level of literacy on the obediences performed at the convent by all women *who lived* at the convent between 1816–1856 and between 1866–1896<sup>2</sup>. Considered collectively, the results of these analyses indicate that, with one exception, neither social background nor the level of literacy influenced the progress of women through the various stages of a monastic vocation during any of the periods examined. However, interpreting the results of the analysis of the obediences women performed within the convent has proven more complicated, both because of the frequent correlation between social background and level of literacy and because of the prevalence of certain skills and expertise among women from particular social backgrounds.

With regard to the possible effects of social background on the time that elapsed prior to women taking both novice and full vows, Tables 1 and 2 demonstrate that the mean time varied by social status for all three periods. Unfortunately, not all of these variations could be analyzed statistically due to an insufficiency of data or such other deficiencies as skewed sample sizes or a significant number of outliers in the samples. But in all except one and, perhaps, two of the testable cases, the analysis showed that the differences between social groups were not significant statistically and could be explained by random variation. The exceptions were the longer time that elapsed during the period 1866–1894 before women from the clerical estate took their full vows and, more ambig-

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<sup>2</sup> Two-sample t-tests were used to examine the effects of social background and of level of literacy on the time that elapsed before women at the convent took their novice and full vows. To attain greater reliability in instances where the data was limited, Mann-Whitney-Wilcoxon tests also were used when feasible. Analysis of the effects of social status and of level of literacy on the obediences performed by members of the convent was conducted using chi square homogeneity tests, complemented in some cases by one-tailed alternative tests, with low- and upper-tailed tests being used in instances of disproportionality to determine under- or overrepresentation. To take account of changes in the level of literacy possessed by women that occurred after their entry into the convent, the analysis was carried out using both the lowest level of literacy exhibited by a woman while at the convent and the highest level she subsequently attained. The significance level used for all tests was .05.

uously, the shorter time prior to their taking novice vows<sup>3</sup>. In the case of full vows, the result may reflect the significant number of girls from the clerical estate who during the 1866–1894 period entered the convent at a very young age as orphans or as students in its school and then remained as members of the monastic community, resulting in unusually long periods before they took full vows. Conversely, such women tended to take their novice vows immediately upon reaching the age of majority, which would have contributed to a shorter mean time prior to such vows being taken by women from the clerical estate in general. But whatever the explanation for these two cases, both the majority of test results and the generally small range of variation in the mean time that elapsed before women from different social groups took novice and full vows, particularly during the latter two time periods, support the conclusion that social background exerted little influence on the progression of women at the convent through the stages of a monastic vocation.

*Table 1. Mean Time to Novice and Full Vows (Years), Social Background*

	<i>Pre-1816</i>		<i>1816–1856</i>		<i>1866–1894</i>	
	<u>Novice</u>	<u>Full</u>	<u>Novice</u>	<u>Full</u>	<u>Novice</u>	<u>Full</u>
<i>All Members</i>	8.6	14.6	5.8	21.9	11.4	26.9
<i>Clergy</i>	6.3	10.8	5.5	24.4	8.8	31.3
<i>Meshchanstvo</i>	7.0	18.9	4.9	22.4	13.5	35.8
<i>All Peasants</i>	6.8	18.6	6.1	19.6	11.6	26.0
<i>Freed Serfs</i>	5.0	18.3	5.1	16.0	–	–
<i>Other Peasants</i>	7.3	21.0	6.7	22.4	–	–
<i>Military, Enlisted</i>	12.0	21.2	4.7	22.3	6.2	–
<i>Military, Officers</i>	12.5	9.1 <sup>4</sup>	4.3	–	–	–
<i>Nobility</i>	19.5	15.5 <sup>4</sup>	6.0	21.9	10.0	16.5
<i>State Officials</i>	8.0	12.2	5.9	18.0	–	–

**Source:** Russian Sisters database<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> In the case of novice vows, the two-sample t-test indicated that the difference was statistically significant, whereas the Mann-Whitney-Wilcoxon test indicated that it was not. While the nature of the data in this instance suggests that the results of the Mann-Whitney-Wilcoxon test might be more reliable than those of the two-sample t-test, the divergence, nonetheless, calls into question any conclusions that might be drawn from them.

<sup>4</sup> These means appear to have been skewed by the number of nuns who transferred into the convent when Dorofeïa became abbess in 1802.

<sup>5</sup> For an explanation of the database, see: *Wagner W.G., Barnitt K. A Quantitative Study...* P.751–776.

Table 2. Mean Time to Novice and Full Vows, P-Values\*, Social Background

	1816–1856		1866–1894	
	<u>Novice</u>	<u>Full</u>	<u>Novice</u>	<u>Full</u>
<i>Two-Sample t-Tests</i>				
<i>Clergy</i>	–	.2134	.0165**	.0217**
<i>Meshchanstvo</i>	–	.7715	.3520	–
<i>All Peasants</i>	–	.2969	.8601	.5665
<i>Peasants Other than Freed Serfs</i>	–	.7770	.8849	.6383
<i>Mann-Whitney-Wilcoxon Tests</i>				
<i>Clergy</i>			.2455	.0225**
<i>Meshchanstvo</i>			.5641	–
<i>All Peasants</i>			–	.5311
<i>Peasants Other than Freed Serfs</i>			–	.5311

\* P-values indicate the probability of observed results in statistical analysis. A P-value of <.05 indicates the probability of a statistically significant difference between the means being tested, and thus in this case the likelihood of an effect of social background on the time elapsed prior to taking novice and full vows. The lower the P-value, the greater the probability of an effect. A double asterisk (\*\*) indicates the probability, and a triple asterisk (\*\*\*), a very high probability, of such an effect.

Source: Russian Sisters database<sup>6</sup>.

The same conclusion can be drawn, with greater confidence, from the analysis of the possible effects of differences in the level of literacy possessed by women at the convent. In this case, Table 3 demonstrates that although the mean time that elapsed before women at the convent took both novice and full vows also varied by level of literacy for all three periods, the pattern of variations differed across periods. For example, in the pre-1816 period less time elapsed before fully literate women took full vows than was the case for illiterate women, whereas in the 1866–1894 period the reverse was true. None of the differences within a period, moreover, proved to be statistically significant and all could be explained by random variation (Table 4). As in the case of a woman's social background and secular identity, her level of literacy thus appears to have had little influence on her progression through the stages of a monastic vocation, in contrast — as we shall see — to the obediences she performed. Hence, the results of the analyses regarding both social background and level of literacy indirectly support the conclusion that progression through a monastic vocation at the convent was determined mainly by criteria and considerations internal to the community.

<sup>6</sup> For an explanation of the database, see: Wagner W. G., Barnitt K. A Quantitative Study...

Table 3. Mean Time to Novice and Full Vows (Years), Level of Literacy

	Pre-1816		1816–1856		1866–1894	
	Novice	Full	Novice	Full	Novice	Full
All Members	8.6	14.6	5.8	21.9	11.4	26.9
Full Literacy	7.5	11.6	5.9	20.7	10.2	28.3
Partial Literacy	8.8	16.7	5.1	22.8	11.8	25.3
No Literacy	9.4	19.1	5.5	22.4	12.0	26.8

Source: Russian Sisters database<sup>7</sup>.

Table 4. Mean Time to Novice and Full Vows, P-Values, Level of Literacy

	Pre-1816		1816–1856		1866–1894	
	Novice	Full	Novice	Full	Novice	Full
<i>Two-Sample t-Tests</i>						
Full Literacy	.6294	.0900	.5478	.5288	.3746	.4658
Partial Literacy	.9440	.5751	.5206	.6321	.8006	.3910
No Literacy	.6547	.1908	.9809	.7589	.6009	.9601
<i>Mann-Whitney-Wilcoxon Tests</i>						
Full Literacy	.6861	.1382				
Partial Literacy	.6282	.0712			.7374	
No Literacy	.3341	.0994				.9951

Source: Russian Sisters database<sup>8</sup>

Only the age at which a woman entered the convent consistently demonstrated a statistically significant correlation with the time that elapsed prior to full and, much more weakly and only for the pre-1816 period, novice vows being taken. The correlation was negative, i.e. the younger the age of entry into the convent, the longer the period before vows were taken, and vice versa. Moreover, as Table 5 demonstrates, for all three periods the age of entry explains a high percentage of the variability between women in the time that elapsed before full vows were taken and provides a strong indicator of the length of this period. For the pre-1816 period, for example, age of entry explains 55 % of the variability, 50 % for the period 1816–1856, and nearly 40 % for the period 1866–1894. In addition, analysis of the differences in the mean time prior to novice and full vows being taken between the three time periods shows these differences to be statistically significant in all but one ambiguous case, that between novice vows for the pre-1816 and the 1866–

<sup>7</sup> For an explanation of the database, see: *Wagner W. G., Barnitt K. A Quantitative Study...*

<sup>8</sup> For an explanation of the database, see: *Ibid.*

1894 periods (Table 6)<sup>9</sup>. The results with regard to full vows are unambiguous, however, and reflect the impact of the steadily declining age at which women entered the convent during the nineteenth century in a context where they were legally prohibited from taking such vows before age 50 prior to 1832 and age 40 thereafter<sup>10</sup>.

Table 5. Relationship of Age to Novice and Full Vows, Linear Regressions, R-Squared Values

	Novice Vows	Full Vows
Pre-1816	.3171	.5481
1816–1856	.1329	.5031
1866–1894	.0580	.3969

Source: Russian Sisters database<sup>11</sup>

Table 6. Time to Novice and Full Vows, Differences Between Periods, P-Values

Comparison between:	Pre-1816 & 1816–1856		1816–1856 & 1866–1894		Pre-1816 & 1866–1894	
	Novice	Full	Novice	Full	Novice	Full
<i>Two-Sample t-Tests</i>						
	.0248**	7.808e-06***	2.626e-13***	.0002***	.0508	7.919e-12***
<i>Mann-Whitney-Wilcoxon Tests</i>						
	.0081***		.0139**			

Source: Russian Sisters database<sup>12</sup>.

As noted above, analysis of the effects of social status and of level of literacy on the obediences performed by members of the Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross has proven more complicated because of the ways in which social background, literacy, and possession of particular skills and expertise often overlapped with one another. The analysis is complicated still further by the fact that a significant number of women became literate or improved their level of literacy while at the convent. To take account of such changes, analysis of the effects of literacy on the assignment of obediences was carried out using both the lowest level of literacy exhibited by a woman while at the convent and the highest level she subsequently attained. In addition, because the organization, assignment, and structure of obediences at the convent changed radically after its reorganization and relocation, only the periods 1816–1856 and 1866–1896 were examined. Despite these complications and limitations, the results of the analysis—presented in Tables 7–8—offer valuable insight into the internal life of the convent. When interpreting these results, however, it is important to bear in mind that they do not

<sup>9</sup> Again in this case, the Mann-Whitney-Wilcoxon test indicated that the difference was statistically significant whereas the two-sample t-test indicated that it was not. Although the nature of the data suggests that in this case, too, the result produced by the former test might be more reliable than that of the latter; this result, nonetheless, must be treated with caution.

<sup>10</sup> Wagner W. G., Barnitt K. A Quantitative Study... P. 751–776.

<sup>11</sup> For an explanation of the database, see: Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> For an explanation of the database, see: Ibid.

signify exclusivity but show only the absence or existence of statistically significant disproportionality. Women from all social backgrounds and possessing all levels of literacy could be found among those performing the tasks composing each obedience category.

Table 7. Effect of Social Background on Obediences, 1816–1896, P-Values

Obedience Category	Religion	Handicrafts	Domestic	Education/ Welfare	Gold-Sewing	Icon Painting <sup>13</sup>
<i>1816–1856</i>						
Nobility/ Military Officer	.7401	.1635	.0229**	.3519	.0104**	–
Clergy	.3466	.7068	.6488	.1923	.2938	–
Meshchanstvo	.2834	.5998	.4984	.3119	.5749	–
All Peasants	.5008	.9217	.0058***	.9546	.7151	–
Freed Serfs	.9821	.9935	.7192	.9765	.2608	–
Other Peasants	.4168	.7335	.0050***	.5349	.3956	–
<i>1866–1896</i>						
Clergy	.0103**	.1067	.0342**	.6647	.0036***	.9632
Meshchanstvo	.5869	.1749	.8993	.0297**	.6459	.0431**
All Peasants	.0866	.0703	.0004***	.2072	.0011***	.0522

Source: Russian Sisters database<sup>14</sup>.

Unfortunately, because of their small sample size, some groups could not be analyzed statistically with regard to the effects of social background on the assignment of obediences. But the analysis of the groups that could be examined shows that in both periods investigated peasants were overrepresented among those members of the convent performing domestic obediences to a statistically significant degree, although interestingly for the earlier period, this result does not apply to peasants identified as “freed serfs” (*otpushchenitsy*)<sup>15</sup>. Conversely, during the period 1866–1896, peasants were underrepresented to a statistically significant degree among those assigned to gold-sewing work (Table 7). Mirroring these results for the earlier period, noblewomen and the widows and daughters of military officers (again considered as one group) were overrepresented among members of the convent engaged in gold-sewing work and underrepresented among those performing domestic obediences to a statistically significant degree (Table 7)<sup>16</sup>. For the later period, women from the clerical estate similarly were overrepresented to a statistically significant degree among members of the convent engaged in gold-sewing work, as well as among those performing religious obediences, while being underrepresented among women assigned to domestic

<sup>13</sup> This obedience was only infrequently recorded prior to the 1866 report.

<sup>14</sup> For an explanation of the database, see: *Wagner W. G., Barnitt K. A Quantitative Study...*

<sup>15</sup> The number of women at the convent identified in this way during the 1866–1896 period was too small to test.

<sup>16</sup> There were too few women in these groups during the 1866–1896 period to enable testing.



obediences (Table 7). Also, in the period 1866–1896, women from the *meshchanstvo* were overrepresented to a statistically significant degree among members of the convent engaged both in painting icons and in the performance of obediences categorized as “education and welfare,” which consisted mainly of teaching in the convent’s school, working in its pharmacy, hospital, or almshouse, and caring for orphans or for elderly and infirm sisters (Table 7). Apart from these cases, social background appears to have exerted little influence on the assignment of obediences in any systematic way, at least that is discernable.

Table 8. Effect of Level of Literacy on Obediences, 1816–1896, P-Values

Obedience Category	Religion	Handicrafts	Domestic	Education/ Welfare	Gold-Sewing	Icon Painting <sup>17</sup>
<i>1816–1856</i>						
<i>Lowest Literacy Level</i>						
Full	.3912	.5357	.0002***	.9349	.2584	–
Partial	.3086	.4010	.8775	.5914	.0146**	–
No Literacy	.0606	.8354	.0007***	.5527	.0004***	–
<i>Highest Literacy Level</i>						
Full	.0098***	.9969	.0002***	.8192	.0001***	–
Partial	.9958	.8162	.1561	.9812	.4212	–
No Literacy	.0035***	.8198	.0110**	.8233	.0005***	–
<i>1866–1896</i>						
<i>Lowest Literacy Level</i>						
Full	.0110**	.0072***	.0002***	.1221	.0252**	.0047***
Partial	.0639	.4018	.9655	.2712	.0884	.8399
No Literacy	1.006e-05***	.0010***	.0001***	.7314	.0002***	.0035***
<i>Highest Literacy Level</i>						
Full	.8609	.3014	1.196e-10***	.4250	.2574	.4968
Partial	.1752	.7078	.7750	.2905	.6072	.9842
No Literacy	.1748	.5658	1.731e-13***	.0207**	.0605 <sup>18</sup>	.4843

Source: Russian Sisters database<sup>19</sup>.

<sup>17</sup> This obedience was only infrequently recorded prior to the 1866 report.

<sup>18</sup> This result may be invalid because the large enough condition of the sample size was not satisfied.

<sup>19</sup> For an explanation of the database, see: Wagner W. G., Barnitt K. A Quantitative Study...

With regard to the effects of the level of literacy on the assignment of obediences, with one exception the results of the analysis differ depending on whether the lowest or the highest level of literacy attained by members of the convent is used as the basis for analysis. The exception is the statistically significant underrepresentation of fully literate women, and overrepresentation of illiterate women, among those performing domestic obediences that is demonstrated regardless of the level of literacy on which the analysis is based (Table 8). The consistency of this result suggests that the level of literacy strongly influenced assignment to a domestic obedience. Conversely, the differences between the results of the analyses using the lowest and the highest levels of literacy exhibited by members of the convent suggest, perhaps, a modest influence of full literacy on the assignment to religious obediences, handicraft and gold-sewing work, or the painting of icons. When the lowest level of literacy is used as the basis for analysis, and the percentage of fully literate women in the convent's membership consequently is the smallest and that of illiterate women is the highest, fully literate women were overrepresented—and illiterate women were underrepresented—to a statistically significant degree among those performing religious obediences and engaged in handicraft and gold-sewing work, and the painting of icons. These statistical differences disappear when the analysis is based on the highest level of literacy attained, i.e. when the percentage of fully and partially literate members of the convent is highest and the percentage of illiterate members is lowest (Table 8). These differences in results reflect the increase in the incidence of literacy among members of the convent that resulted from both the higher incidence of literacy among its incoming members, particularly after the early 1880's, and the acquisition of some level of literacy by existing members. By the 1890's, fully and partially literate women simply stood out less in the convent's membership than they had done previously (see Tables 8 and 9 in our first article). But the fact that during the 1866–1896 period the obediences assigned to 43 % of the women who acquired some level of literacy after their entry into the convent changed from a domestic task to a religious obedience, gold-sewing or handicraft work, or the painting of icons suggests that literacy was a consideration in the assignment of obediences<sup>20</sup>.

One possible explanation for these patterns in the effects both of social background and of levels of literacy on the assignment of obediences could be the influence of social preference and prejudice, particularly given the close relationship between social status and literacy. Women from privileged social backgrounds, who also tended more frequently to be fully literate, were disproportionately assigned to religious obediences, gold-sewing work, or the painting of icons, while peasants, among whom the incidence of illiteracy was highest, were relegated disproportionately to domestic tasks.

But another, equally and perhaps more plausible, explanation of the patterns of effects revealed by our analysis is that obediences were assigned based on how the particular skills and knowledge possessed by individual members of the convent would contribute to the community as a whole and to the attainment of its goals. After the relocation and

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<sup>20</sup> This percentage is based on the individual records of members of the convent and was calculated using only those records that indicated a woman's obedience both before and after she acquired some level of literacy. In 34 % of the cases, previously illiterate women already were performing a religious obedience or were engaged in gold sewing or handicraft work, or the painting of icons prior to becoming literate. In addition, a significant number of partially literate women who became fully literate also were reassigned to an obedience in one of these four categories after improving their level of literacy.

reconstruction of the convent, the number of its churches increased from one to four, with two self-standing chapels later added. These all required women to serve in them, as members of choirs, in various liturgical roles, to record requests for and offer prayers, to read the psalter, to manage the sale of candles and icons, and so on. Prior familiarity with many of these roles would be an asset in their performance, and literacy was essential for several of them, a combination of attributes possessed disproportionately by women from the clerical estate. Similarly, after its relocation the convent possessed an orchard, several gardens, and a small number of cattle and other livestock that needed to be tended, and after its reorganization it had a steadily growing number of members who had to be fed, clothed, and otherwise materially provided for, all tasks for which the background of peasant women would prepare them particularly well. Economically, especially in the first half of the nineteenth century the convent relied heavily on the sale of high-quality gold-sewing work for the income needed to support the community and its religious activities. Embroidery was a skill common among women from the privileged strata of society, particularly the nobility in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It is thus not unreasonable to conclude that the results of our analyses reflect the deployment of sisters' labor by the convent's leadership based on the skills and abilities of individual members with the objective of meeting the community's internal needs and serving its religious purposes. The annual report by the Nizhnii Novgorod diocesan consistory to the Holy Synod for 1898 offers support for this conclusion. Commenting on the wide range of activities engaged in by convents generally in the diocese, the report observed:

*[T]he work of the sisters exhibits a strong, systematic division and distribution of labor by type into specific groups of toiler-nuns. Precisely this proper division and appropriate rotation of labor... serves, in our view, as one of the main conditions for the success and productivity of this labor and for the high quality of craftsmanship for which monastic products are renowned. Only such an ordering of monastic life and work makes possible the surprising order and harmony that reign in these large monastic communities...*<sup>21</sup>

Within this structured division of labor, it is not clear that for members of the monastic community the performance of some tasks conferred higher status than others. As historian Igor Smolitsch has observed, when carried out in a convent, any task—even the most menial and seemingly mundane—acquires a deeper meaning because of the religious purposes it serves<sup>22</sup>.

The composition of the convent's leadership itself over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries supports the conclusion that personal attributes and abilities judged by criteria internal to the community rather than worldly social identity and status determined the assignment of obediences within the convent. Not surprisingly, given their responsibilities, all the women who held leadership positions at the convent during this period were literate, nearly all fully literate, although some acquired their literacy only after having entered the convent. The social background of the women who fulfilled positions of leadership, however, was quite diverse and reflected the range of social groups represented in the convent's membership overall (Table 9). While a third of the individual women who held various offices came from the clerical estate, nearly 20% were peasants, with *meshchanki* and merchants each constituting 15% of this group. Only two were

<sup>21</sup> Otchet o sostoyanii Nizhegorodskoj eparkhii // Rossiskij Gosudarstvennii Istoricheskii Arkhiv (RGIA). F. 796. Op. 442. D. 1731. L. 11.

<sup>22</sup> Smolich I. K. Russkoe monashestvo 988–1917. Moscow, 1997. P. 292–293.

Table 9. Officers and Social Background, 1816–1917

By Office:	Church						Total
	Abdess	Treasurer	Superintendent	Sacristan	Precentor	Warden	
Nobility/ Military Officer	2				1		3
State Official		1	1	1			3
Clergy	2	5	1	2	4		14
Merchant	1		2	1			4
Meshchanstvo			2	2			4
Peasant	1	3	1	2		1	8
Military, Enlisted	—	<u>1</u>	—	—	—	—	<u>1</u>
Total	6	10	7	8	5	1	37
By Person:							
Nobility/ Military Officer	2						
State Official	2						
Clergy	9						
Merchant	4						
Meshchanstvo	4						
Peasant	5						
Military, Enlisted	<u>1</u>						
Total	27						

**Sources:** TsANO, f. 582, op. 1, dd. 47, 88, 129, 211, 329, 385, 460, 531, 588, 631; f. 570, op. 559 za 1906 g., d. 62, za 1917 g., d. 56a.

noblewomen (7%). Nor did women from a particular social group dominate any office except that of precentor, essentially the senior chorister, who most often had come from the clerical estate. As Table 9 indicates, women generally held several offices during their career, typically moving up a hierarchy of increased responsibility and authority as they gained experience. The career of sister Vera (Evdokiia Iakovleva) provides an example of this progression as well as of the opportunities that the convent provided for women from even the least privileged background. An unmarried peasant from Nizhnii Novgorod province, Vera entered the convent in 1836 at the age of 25. Initially illiterate, she first

worked in the convent's refectory. By 1866, after she had become partially literate, her obediences consisted of singing in one of the convent's choirs and the painting of icons. Fully literate by 1876, she became superintendent of the convent in 1882 and treasurer in 1883, at the age of 72<sup>23</sup>.

To the degree that the second interpretation of our results accurately reflects the values and practices that shaped life within the Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross after the early nineteenth century, it may help explain the disproportionate appeal of a monastic life to young, unmarried women from the unprivileged and poorer strata of society, and thus also the transformation of the convent's social roles and membership that already was well advanced prior to the abolition of serfdom. Especially for young women whose social status and circumstances severely limited their options, after its reorganization on a communal basis, the convent provided not only opportunities for religious enrichment and spiritual fulfillment, but also the possibility of a respected and materially secure life engaged in meaningful labor within a community of women in which worldly status appears largely to have been transcended. To the extent, moreover, that the assignment of obediences was influenced by a woman's level of literacy rather than her social background, the lack of literacy also was a condition that regularly was overcome at the convent, as the case of sister Vera attests.

## Conclusion

As our two articles taken together demonstrate, a statistical analysis of the annual membership reports submitted by female monastic communities after the early nineteenth century can provide considerable insight both into the character, causes, and process of their transformation during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and into their internal life during this period. In the case of the Nizhnii Novgorod Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross, our analysis shows that the transformation of the convent took place in two stages. The first occurred over the course of the first half of the nineteenth century and was precipitated mainly by the reorganization of the convent on a communal basis. Although adopted for religious reasons, this form of organization provided the convent with the flexibility, structures, and practices that enabled it to absorb and assimilate a larger number of members from more diverse backgrounds, to utilize these women effectively for the support of the community as well as for the attainment of its religious objectives, and to adapt to continuously changing conditions within its external environment. Reorganization on a communal basis not only enabled the convent to grow substantially in size and social diversity, but also contributed significantly to its transformation from a community composed predominantly of older widows into one composed mainly of younger, unmarried women. While the religious nature and role of the convent remained central, its social character and role thus also were transformed, from a place of retirement for older women into a form of largely self-supporting community for women from a broader range of ages and, initially, social backgrounds. Eventually, this community came

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<sup>23</sup> TsANO. F.582. Op. 1. D.129, 211, 329–30, 385, 460, 531; *Wagner W.G.* The Transformation of Female Orthodox Monasticism in Nizhnii Novgorod Diocese, 1764–1929, in *Comparative Perspective // Journal of Modern History*. 2006. Vol.78. P.55; *Miller M.L.* "Like a Hen Who Gathers Her Chicks": Female Leadership in Russian Orthodox Monasticism, 1700–1917 // *Church and Society in Modern Russia. Essays in Honor of Gregory L. Freeze / eds M. Hildermeier, E. K. Wirschafter*. Wiesbaden, 2015. P.95–112.

to provide a variety of services to an even broader range of women, through its school, pharmacy, hospital, almshouse, and shelter for orphans<sup>24</sup>.

The second stage of the convent's transformation occurred in the wake of the abolition of serfdom and reflected the effects not only of the emancipation, but also of the expansion of female education and the opportunities for employment and public activism especially for educated women during the post-emancipation period. This phase of transformation intensified after the early 1880's in response to the accelerating pace of modernizing social, economic, and cultural change in Nizhnii Novgorod and the surrounding region. Together, these developments led first to the extensive growth in size and then, eventually, to a considerable narrowing of the social diversity of the convent's membership, with women from the privileged strata of society largely disappearing, those from the clerical estate beginning to decline, and those from the poorer and unprivileged strata of urban and rural society increasing rapidly and becoming predominant. But while increasingly more plebian, the convent's membership continued to become more literate, exhibiting levels of literacy significantly above those of the general female urban and rural populations. In addition to widening the media through which female piety was experienced and expressed, the expansion of female education in the late imperial period, therefore, appears to have had a differential impact on the relative appeal of a monastic life for different groups of women.

While our analysis thus demonstrates that social identity and location strongly influenced the decision of women to undertake a monastic life during the late imperial period, however, it also indicates that these worldly attributes exerted little influence on such central aspects of life within the convent as progression through the stages of a monastic vocation, the assignment of tasks performed, or elevation to positions of leadership. While profoundly shaped by the social and economic environment in which the Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross existed, the community of women who composed it, therefore, appears also to have transcended this environment in important ways, which may help to explain the disproportionate appeal of such communities in general to Orthodox women from the poorer and unprivileged strata of late imperial Russian society.

This disproportionate appeal of a monastic life for women, especially literate women, from the poorer and unprivileged strata of Russian society reveals an important dimension of the growth and transformation of female Orthodox monasticism in late imperial Russia. Far from losing their vitality and meaning in a context of modernizing change, monastic institutions provided women with a medium through which they could both respond to the changes they were experiencing and take advantage of new possibilities created by them. They could do so in part because, as we have argued elsewhere, these institutions themselves were adapting to the same processes of change through the actions of their leadership, the women who joined them, and the lay Orthodox believers who utilized and supported them. In the case of the Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross, for example, over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries its activities expanded to include a range of educational, health, and welfare services, and its economy was refashioned to reflect the development of capitalism in Nizhnii Novgorod and the

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<sup>24</sup> *Wagner W.G.*: 1) *The Transformation of...* P.823–826; 2) *Fashioning Ideals of Monasticism and Womanhood: The Nizhnii Novgorod Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross, 1802–1857 // Everyday Life in Russian History. Quotidian Studies in Honor of Daniel Kaiser. Bloomington (IN), 2010. P.93–97.*

surrounding region<sup>25</sup>. Again, this is not to diminish the religious dimensions of the appeal of monasticism for the women who undertook this form of life in late imperial Russia or the fundamentally religious nature of the communities they entered. Nor does it deny the complex and multiple motives of new entrants to monastic communities or causes of the monastic revival that took place at this time<sup>26</sup>. It is merely to recognize that both the appeal of monasticism and monastic institutions exist within, and vary in response to, particular historical contexts. Viewed from this perspective, as exemplified by the Nizhnii Novgorod Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross, the transformation of female Orthodox monasticism in nineteenth and early twentieth-century imperial Russia can be understood in part as a process of interrelated mutual adaptation through which the women who composed monastic communities reshaped them institutionally and functionally while responding to the conditions of emerging modernity.

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<sup>25</sup> Wagner W. G. Fashioning Ideals of Monasticism and Womanhood: The Nizhnii Novgorod Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross, 1802–1857 // *Everyday Life in Russian History. Quotidian Studies in Honor of Daniel Kaiser*. Bloomington, IN, 2010 / eds G. Marker, J. Neuberger, M. Poe, S. Rupp. P. 85–102; Wagner W. G.: 1) The Transformation of... P. 793–845; 2) Paradoxes of Piety: The Nizhegorod Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross, 1807–1935 // *Orthodox Russia. Belief and Practice Under the Tsars* / eds V. A. Kivelson, R. H. Green. University Park, PA, 2003. P. 211–238; Kirichenko O. V. *Zhenskoe pravoslavnoe podvizhnichestvo v Rossii (XIX — seredina XX v.)*. Moscow, 2010. P. 202–253; Zyrianov P. N. *Russkie monastyri i monashestvo v XIX i nachale XX veka*. Moscow, 2002. P. 134–141, 158, 208–213; Meehan B. From Contemplative Practice to Charitable Activity: Russian Women's Religious Communities and the Development of Charitable Work, 1861–1917 // *Lady Bountiful Revisited: Women, Philanthropy, and Power* / ed. by K. McCarthy. New Brunswick, 1990. P. 142–156.

<sup>26</sup> Kenworthy S. M. *The Heart of Russia: Trinity-Sergius, Monasticism, and Society after 1825*. New York, 2010; Zyrianov P. N. *Russkie monastyri i monashestvo v XIX i nachale XX veka*. Moscow, 2002; Wagner W. G. *Religion in Modern Russia: Revival and Survival* // *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*. 2014. Vol. 15. P. 151–168; Kirichenko O. V. *Zhenskoe pravoslavnoe podvizhnichestvo...; Emchenko E. B.* 1) *Zhenskie monastyri v Rossii* // *Monashestvo i monastyri v Rossii XI-XX veka* Moscow, 2002. P. 245–284; 2) *Gosudarstvennoe zakonodatel'stvo i zhenskie monastyri v XVIII — nachale XX veka* // *Tserkov' v istorii Rossii*. Issue 5 / ed. by O. Ju. Vasil'eva. Moscow, 2003. P. 171–221; Beliakova E. V., Beliakova N. A., Emchenko E. B. *Zhenshchina v pravoslavii: tserkovnoe pravo i rossiiskaia praktika*. Moscow, 2011; Meehan-Waters B. *Popular Piety, Local Initiative and the Founding of Women's Religious Communities in Russia, 1764–1904* // *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*. 1986. Vol. 30. P. 117–142; Miller M. L. *Social Revolution in Russian Female Monasticism: The Case of the Convent of the Intercession, 1700–1917* // *Russian History*. 2013. Vol. 40. P. 166–182.

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