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How to Survive In The Early Modern City: Moscow Town Dwellers' Economic Strategies In The Mid 18th – Early 19th Centuries

The paper is based on the source documents of the Moscow police, Moscow Board of public relief and Moscow Foundling house of the late 18th century. Town dwellers of the lowest tiers of the society (poor officials, destitute townspeople, non-commissioned officers, their widows and orphans, soldiers' wives and widows) were detained having committed minor offences and were examined by the Moscow police before being punished by placing in the newly opened (1775) Moscow work- and correction houses. The detainees could enjoy some freedom in the early modern Moscow although formally the majority of them were ascribed to landowners or were home serfs. Some of them had not got any legal passports or certificates from their owners or authorities. It complicated their life in the city. The majority of those detained for the indecent behavior were soldiers' wives and widows. They were excluded from their social tier (usually peasantry) as soon as their husbands were conscripted. They had not much opportunities to ensure the subsistence for themselves and their children. All that circumstances forced them to make choices in the everyday life and to act while fending for themselves. The examination speeches held in the police official records reveal different ways of survival of a pre-modern individual in a modernizing society. The detainees who possessed restricted economic resources described their strategies of survival in the society with the rigorous social delimitation. They used their social capital if they had it and resorted to different types of economic activities overcoming these restrictions. Yet there was a risk to slide into destitution, to commit a theft, or to become a prostitute. The modernizing social reality described in the documents is represented as diverse and variable. It did not correspond the definitions of the law anymore.