



Economic effects of voluntary religious castration on the informal provision of cooperation: The case of the Russian Skoptsy sect

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the effects of voluntary religious castration (VRC) on the informal provision of cooperation through boycott. To do so, it analyzes the Russian Skoptsy sect, active from 1772 to 1930. The Skoptsy were outlawed by the Russian state and had to secure cooperation through informal means. To do so, the sect relied on the threat of boycott against noncooperative individuals. I argue that VRC ensured the credibility of this threat. First, VRC created a high entry cost, which screened for single-minded and patient individuals who placed high value upon repeated in-group interaction. Second, VRC created a high exit cost from the sect because of the hostile attitude of the Russian populace to castrated individuals. Moreover, the public could cheaply identify the ex-sect members and punish them because of permanent physiological changes caused by VRC. The credible threat of ostracism secured widespread cooperation among the Skoptsy and enabled the sect to support its members through a system of mutual aid and inheritance. Cooperation in the sect also allowed for a rapid creation of wealth through market collusion, making the Skoptsy one of the richest sects in Russia and abroad.

Abbreviations

VRC voluntary religious castration

The judgement of God will be passed, a white horse will appear, and on the horse sits a czar, a terror to all the sinners.

—Skoptsy poem

1. Introduction

Religious castration is usually associated with irrationality, coercion, and poverty.¹ However, a Russian sect called the Skoptsy represented an exception. The Skoptsy emerged in 1772 in a relatively economically developed country and practiced *voluntary* religious castration (VRC), which required explicit consent. The sect found immense economic success, and many of its members rose from extreme poverty to enormous wealth. Its economic achievements were so tremendous that some scholars have proclaimed the Skoptsy the “religion of the rich” (Nikolskiy 1931: 341).

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¹ For instance, in ancient Sumeria, religious castration was used as a means of enslavement. Pagan cults in ancient Asia coercively performed religious castration upon individuals in extreme poverty (Volkov 1936: 22). In modern times, the Indian *hirjas* are abducted and live as beggars (Saria 2019).

The Russian state outlawed the sect on the grounds that it was dangerous. And yet, despite the sect's inability to rely on formal governance, cooperation within it was widespread, which enabled the Skoptsy to establish effective systems of mutual aid and engage in profitable market collusion across the country and beyond. The sect boasted an estimated membership of ten to fifteen thousand individuals at the height of its popularity in the nineteenth century (Pelikan 1875: 154–55), and it lasted until as late as the early 1930s. How, then, did the Skoptsy secure cooperation under self-governance? Could VRC have played a role?

Leeson can be credited with pioneering the socioeconomic study of odd religious behaviors, from vermin trials (Leeson 2013b) to monastic maledictions (Leeson 2014b) to human sacrifice (Leeson 2014c). Other scholars have embraced this framework and expanded on it (Gershman 2015; Maltsev and Yudanov 2020). However, the literature has not examined VRC and its effects in securing cooperation under self-governance.² To the best of my knowledge, existing economic studies of castration are largely concerned with cost-benefit analysis focusing on cancer (Grochtdreis et al., 2018). Academic economic studies on the Skoptsy are quite scarce as well, as the literature follows anthropological, medical, and historical approaches, not economic ones (see, for instance, Wilson and Roehrborn 1999; Tulpe and Torchinov 2000; Engelstein 2003; Emeliantseva 2009). This represents a scholarly lacuna, which the present paper fills.

My paper offers an alternative explanation to the Marxist interpretation of the Skoptsy. Instead of focusing on VRC's effects on cooperation, Soviet economists and historians (Kholodkovskiy 1930; Volkov 1936; Klibanov 1972; Nikol'skiy 1931) interpreted it through the lens of power relations. These scholars held that the sect was an oppressive vehicle through which its wealthy members exploited its poorest. By depriving the poor of their genitalia, the story goes, the wealthy Skoptsy created a virtual workforce of slaves forever destined to labor in the factories of their oppressors. However, I find this explanation lacking.³ First, most of the peasantry in Russia already lived as serfs. There was no need to further enslave them. Second, the Marxist interpretation does not explain why the wealthiest members of the sect also went through the dangerous ritual, instead of leaving their genitalia intact and subjecting only the poorest individuals to the practice. This deficiency is especially glaring, as some Skoptsy groups' wealthy members greatly outnumbered their poor members. Sometimes the wealthy constituted as high as 72 percent of a particular group (Nikol'skiy 1931: 344). My explanation accounts for these facts by focusing on VRC's role in securing cooperation within the sect, which benefited both the poor and the wealthy.

This paper examines the effects that VRC has on informal provision of social cooperation. To do so, it analyzes the economics and organization of the Skoptsy sect, which emerged to seek religious salvation amid a severe plague outbreak in Russia in 1772. Despite being outlawed by the state and having no recourse to the institutions of formal governance, the sect successfully secured cooperation through the informal threat of boycott. I argue that for the Skoptsy, VRC ensured the boycott's credibility by creating high costs of entry into and exit from the sect. The high costs of entry screened for singularly devoted and patient individuals, while the high costs of exit due to the general populace's hostile attitude toward the castrates reduced the alternatives for living outside the sect. These factors secured the credibility of boycott, and with it, the Skoptsy's in-group social order was rarely undermined, which enabled the sect to support its members through mutual aid and inheritance systems. Cooperation also allowed for an explosive creation of Skoptsy wealth, exercised through market collusion in Russia and Romania.

An important element of my analysis concerns the costs of exit from the Skoptsy. Exit costs have historically been imposed by religious groups, such as Romani, that have leveraged superstitions to incentivize individuals to remain within their group. Romani, for instance, proclaim the world outside their group to be religiously polluted. This belief, inculcated in their infancy and reinforced throughout their lives, greatly magnifies the costs of social exclusion, to the point that some Romani even commit suicide after leaving their group, as they feel unable to live in a world that so repulses them (Leeson 2013a: 284). However, for the Skoptsy, these exit costs were imposed from outside, as the Russian public considered the castrates as pariahs (Volkov 1936: 55) and avoided them or exercised violence against them. I analyze whether these costs were meaningful, as their existence hinged upon whether the Russian public could identify members of the Skoptsy in a cost-efficient manner.

The analytical framework proposed in this paper need not be limited to the Skoptsy; it may be relevant when studying similar phenomena encountered in modern times. Consider, for instance, organizations in developed countries that either are criminal or operate outside the state's reach. To enhance the effectiveness of informal governance institutions and secure cooperation, these organizations impose high physical entry costs in the form of bodily transformation or impose high costs of exit by reducing their members' social alternative—for instance, through requiring practices that make them physically identifiable by the public. One such organization is the Japanese Yakuza, whose members are required to get nearly full-body tattoos as a costly commitment ritual. The Yakuza also practice *yubitsume*, a ritualistic self-amputation of fingers and thus a visible physiological modification (Bosmia et al., 2014). Street gangs in the United States require face tattoos for a similar reason (Skarbek 2011: 709, 711).

My study is supported by several types of empirical sources. The first is official reports on the Skoptsy commissioned by the Russian czarist government. The initial report was composed by Nadezhdin (1845) and contains important observations on the Skoptsy's rituals and organization. Pelikan's (1875) report on the Skoptsy is especially crucial, as it is supplemented with medical observations and data and remains one of the most thorough publications on the sect to this day. The report by Chief Procurator of the Russian Most Holy Synod Konstantin Pobedonoscev (1905) contains important facts about the Skoptsy's rituals and economic presence in Russia.

The second type of source is the historical scholarship of Soviet Marxist and contemporary Russian academics. Kholodkovskiy (1930), Nikol'skiy (1931), Volkov (1936), and Klibanov (1972) provide important details on the Skoptsy's wealth, monopolistic

² Thus, my paper also contributes to the literature on self-governance (see, for instance, Ellickson 1991; Greif 2002; Stringham 2015).

³ Engelstein (2003: 240–55) claims that the Marxist interpretation of the Skoptsy is mistaken, as it was politically charged and written during Stalin's crusade against kulaks and more generally during a period of unfavorable treatment of religion and markets by the Soviet authorities.

formations, and market control. Panchenko (2004), one of the leading scholars on religious sects in Russia, sheds light on the Soviet regime's battle against the sect. Mashkovtsev (2010) describes the activities of the sect in the Vyatka Governorate. Nosyrev (2013), Chernysh (2014), Lukyanov (2018), Ryapolov (2019), and Snigireva (2019) provide illuminating descriptions of the Skoptsy's religious rituals and their attitude on wealth. Inikova (2017a; 2017b) supplies invaluable accounts of the Skoptsy's activities in Romania.

2. The riders of white horses

From 1770 to 1775, Russia suffered a devastating plague outbreak. Radical religious ideas took root, as individuals looked for salvation in the face of almost-imminent death. One such idea led to the creation of the Skoptsy. The first mentions of the Skoptsy date to 1772, when sixty castrated men⁴ were found in the Oryol Governorate by the Russian army (Tulpe and Torchinov 2000: 79).

The Russian government became aware of the Skoptsy when their location was revealed by a rival sect called the Khlysty. The founder of the Skoptsy, a man named Kondratii Selivanov, himself was an ex-member of the Khlysty sect. The Khlysty preached sexual abstinence and asceticism. However, Selivanov felt this was not enough and took the notion of sexual abstinence to the extreme through literal interpretations of passages from the Christian Gospel (Inikova 2017a: 43), such as Matthew 5:29–30:⁵ “If your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.” The Skoptsy founder thus justified castration, which he viewed as necessary to attain salvation. To grow closer to God, one had to dispose of the symbolic emblems of sin, dating to Adam and Eve; one had to tear out the “keys to hell,” which prevented one's spirit from uniting with divinity (Ryapolov 2019: 54).

Ryapolov (2019: 48) mentions that Selivanov quickly attracted dozens of followers with his radical teachings. However, the Khlysty did not take well to such splintering and decided to murder Selivanov and his followers. The assassination narrowly failed, and the Khlysty decided to report the Skoptsy to the Russian state.

The state commission investigating the sect found that the Skoptsy had a system of commandments that prescribed radical sexual abstinence, denial of marriage, frequent fasting, rejection of meat consumption, and use in their daily garments of white—usually in the crotch area—which symbolized their purity (Anderson 1909: 319, 336). The Skoptsy believed that when their ranks swelled to 144, 000, God would issue his judgment. Then Selivanov would “ride the heavenly clouds to Moscow, call for all the Skoptsy with the Czar Bell and go to Saint-Petersburg to hold justice over the living and the dead. All monarchs would throw their crowns to his feet, and all peoples would accept his teachings” (Nikolskiy 1931: 425).

VRC was required to join the Skoptsy. Prior to being subjected to the operation, a potential recruit, or *novik*, would be led to a secret meeting in a sect member's house, dressed in a long white shirt, as, according to Revelation 3:5, “he who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments” (Ryapolov 2019: 55). The sect members would sit around the *novik* barefoot, holding lit candles, symbolizing the sanctity of their meeting. The sect members would then question the newcomer about the latter's resolve to attain salvation and a life free of sin. The questioning lasted for several hours, and only after members ascertained the intentions of the *novik* could the *novik* swear an oath. The oath pledged the prospective newcomer to (1) not snitch on the Skoptsy and in no way acknowledge the sect's involvement in the upcoming operation, (2) cut all ties to the world outside the sect and proclaim fellow sect members as their new family, and (3) undergo castration.

Rozanov (1899: 70) provides the text of the oath: “I came to You, Lord, for a true path of salvation—not by force, but by my own will, and I promise not to tell anyone about this holy deed, not even the czar, not even the prince, not even my father, not even my mother, and I am ready to accept persecution and suffering.” After voicing consent,⁶ the newcomers were subjected to orchiectomy (removal of testicles), or what the Skoptsy called “the first seal” or “mounting a piebald horse” (Panchenko 2004: 372).⁷ After some time in the sect, the Skoptsy also engaged in penectomy (removal of the penis), which was called the “second seal” or “mounting a white horse” (Panchenko 2004: 372).⁸

The Skoptsy were organized similarly to the Khlysty sect, living in autonomous groups called *korably*, or “ships,” spread out across Russia and forming a network of club-like organizations between which individuals could move. At the head of every ship was a “prophet,” or “helmsman,” in charge of its development and recruitment. Each ship regularly conducted a religious ritual called the *radeniye*. The purpose of the ritual was to worship God and bring about physical exhaustion to calm down “the sinful flesh” (Ryapolov 2019: 55). The *radeniye* would usually be held in the house of a wealthy member of the ship. Men and women had to be dressed in white

⁴ The only mentions of castration prior to the formation of the Skoptsy are as follows. In 1004, records mention a castrated monk named Adrian. At the end of the eleventh century, two Orthodox Church bishops, Manuil and Fedor, castrated themselves. No further mentions occur until the eighteenth century, when Orthodox Church castrates are mentioned in 1721 and 1740. The mass castration practiced by the Skoptsy was unprecedented in Russian history.

⁵ Other popular passages were Luke 23:29, which stated, “Blessed are the childless women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!” and Matthew 19:12: “For there are eunuchs who were born that way, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others—and there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it.”

⁶ The protocols of interrogation of arrested Skoptsy reveal that they claimed a right to do with their own body as they pleased, expressing no regret for undergoing the operation (Pobedonoscev 1905: 191).

⁷ For male members of the Skoptsy, in the first years of the sect's existence, the sect practiced castration through “fiery baptism,” in which testicles would be burned off with a piece of hot iron. In time, this method faded away in favor of cutting off the genitalia with a knife or a razor. A man's testicles would be first bound by rope, the genitalia then cut off and the wound cauterized.

⁸ To prevent issues with urination after the second seal, “nails were inserted into the urethra to avoid strictures, and such men were said to urinate while sitting or squatting” (Wilson and Roehrborn 1999: 4325).

garments, and the room had icons of Selivanov or relics such as his nails or strands of hair. The ritual began with a communal prayer in the name of God, Selivanov, and the eventual arrival of the “kingdom of Skoptsy” upon Earth. The *radeniye* continued with a series of spinning movements and jumps, which would be accompanied with constant cries of “Oh Spirit!” and “Spirit of the Lord!” (Nadezhdin 1845: 248). During the *radeniye*, the windows and doors in a house were sealed shut for secrecy, causing the temperature inside to rise considerably, in turn causing the Skoptsy to call this ritual a “spiritual sauna.”

Having never encountered such a movement before, the Russian state quickly outlawed the Skoptsy. Sect members were arrested, and Selivanov was sentenced to a harsh beating and sent to a Siberian forced-labor camp in 1774. Despite such treatment, the Skoptsy continued to grow. The Skoptsy spread to fifty-six Russian governorates and oblasts (Reutskiy 1872; Pelikan 1875: 144), and by 1826 its estimated membership was between ten and fifteen thousand people. The sect also secured a dominant economic presence in Russia, colluding in numerous markets and establishing monopolistic control (Iohelson 1894; Aivazov 1915; Nikolskiy 1931; Volkov 1936; Klibanov 1972; Mashkovtsev 2010). Later, the Skoptsy expanded outside of Russia, to Romania, Moldova, and the Baltic states (Inikova 2017a; 2017b). The Skoptsy proved to be a durable organization, lasting until early Soviet rule in the 1930s, when *korably* were still found in Leningrad, Moscow, Saratov, and Rostov (Panchenko 2004: 37–38).

3. Effects of voluntary religious castration on cooperation

The impetus for the creation of the Skoptsy was spiritual, and many joined the sect for purely religious purposes. However, the Skoptsy’s rapid development after the plague years suggests that individuals also joined the sect for other reasons. Peasants could have joined the sect to escape a situation that Nikolskiy (1931: 313–14) described as “hopeless.” According to Ryazantsev (2004: 7), the poorest part of the population bore the brunt of poll taxes, income taxes, and land taxes. Peasants were subjected to serfdom, forced-labor camps, and lengthy military conscription. Volkov (1931: 32) also adds that one of the key reasons for individuals flocking to the Skoptsy was the material burden of raising children under the conditions of serfdom. Escaping to the Skoptsy promised freedom from these obligations. The Skoptsy thus frequently bought peasants out of serfdom if they consented to undergo VRC and join the sect.

Another reason for joining the Skoptsy was their attitude on wealth. Russia’s Orthodox Church had a negative attitude toward wealth and denounced its accumulation. At the same time, the Russian state, while not disparaging commerce per se, nevertheless imposed high capital taxes and stifling regulations upon businesses (Galimova and Chukanov 2012: 26–27) and frequently conferred economic benefits on aristocratic elites instead of merchants (Magdanov 2012: 24–25).⁹ In contrast, a positive attitude to wealth and its unburdened accumulation was central to the Skoptsy’s teachings. According to a legend, Kondratiy Selivanov prophesized that he and his followers would get rich enough to “buy all goods from the land” (Nikolskiy 2003: 418). Accordingly, many individuals sought to join the sect and enrich themselves outside of state and religious institutions. Nikolskiy (2003: 341) characterizes the Skoptsy as a “special religion of merchants, factory owners and moneylenders.” Tulpe and Torchinov (2000: 80) state that many of the religion’s followers were merchants and salesmen. Mashkovtsev (2010: 39) claims that the “bourgeois” element had a “very strong” presence in the sect, as evidenced by the arrests in the Vyatka Governorate. The sect had many renowned millionaires in its ranks, such as Sadovnikov, Antonov, Vasiliyev, Kobychyev, Nikonov, Borisov, Romanov, Popov, Kuznetsov, Frolov, Lagunin, Solodovnikov, and Kostrov (Volkov 1936: 32). Some of these individuals joined the Skoptsy when they were already rich, but some, such as Solodovnikov, started with nothing and obtained their wealth with the aid of the sect.

Yet the very fact that the sect could attract individuals in the thousands and promise them riches seems puzzling. After all, the Skoptsy were outlawed by the Russian state. And many economists assume that without formal governance institutions and law enforcement, “there’s nothing to prevent the strong from plundering the weak, the unscrupulous from bamboozling the unwitting, and the dishonest from defrauding the honest. There’s no social cooperation, only social conflict, no civilization, only chaos” (Leeson 2014a: 1). In this view, cooperation is difficult to achieve without using coercion to overcome opportunism and free riding.

How then, did the sect overcome these issues? The Skoptsy used the informal institution of boycott against noncooperative individuals. According to Skvortsov (1902: 12) and Panchenko (2004: 381), noncooperative behavior within the Skoptsy and refusal to follow the sect’s commandments were punished by exclusion from a ship. However, the choice of boycott as a means of securing cooperation among the Skoptsy appears just as puzzling, as ostracism is frequently not sufficient to secure cooperation. The threat of social exclusion may be undermined by an impatient individual who discounts future payoffs steeply and “may find it worthwhile to defraud his exchange partner despite the fact that he loses future exchange possibilities with the person he defrauds” (Leeson and Coyne 2012: 850). Similarly, if the cheater can leave the group in a costless manner, and many other social alternatives are available to him upon exit, then the boycott loses even more of its credibility.

Perhaps counterintuitively, VRC helped the Skoptsy overcome the obstacles to securing cooperation through its costliness. VRC was painful to undergo and could result in complications or even death from intense bleeding. The recovery process took several weeks (Pelikan 1875: 3). Orchiectomy resulted in a total loss of reproductive ability, and penectomy hindered the ability of an individual to engage in sexual activities.

However, the high cost of VRC helped the sect select individuals with extreme devotion to its cause. As the Skoptsy membership required sacrificing reproduction, it removed a trade-off between the costly upbringing of children (Volkov 1936: 32) and engaging in other pursuits in life. The rejection of parenthood also made the sect’s membership appealing to individuals who could not have children. This is evidenced through Pobedonoscev’s (1905: 191) state report, which notes that the sect attracted a substantial number

⁹ For instance, Count Shuvalov received a monopoly grant from Catherine II for fishing in the White Sea, while guild merchants were ignored.

of childless widowers and infertile men, who, without progeny, channeled their efforts toward zealous religious worship or improvement of their well-being. Thus, agreement to undertake VRC upon joining the sect allowed the Skoptsy to select individuals who would find it costly to be excluded from the sect for failure to cooperate.

VRC also fulfilled another key requirement for successful boycotting, as it ensured that the sect would comprise patient individuals. Patient individuals do not discount the future steeply, and they place higher value on repeated cooperative interaction within their group (Leeson 2008: 167); thus, the cost of social exclusion for them is much higher. The literature shows that patience and the cost of joining an organization are also positively correlated (Posner 1998; Irons 2001; Wilson 2007: 151), and this correlation is strengthened if commitments are made upfront (Iannaccone 1992: 272; Leeson 2008: 169). Thus, VRC allowed the Skoptsy to screen for patient individuals, as it constituted a particularly costly upfront “investment” (Klibanov 1972: 96). This effect would be even more pronounced in the Skoptsy, as spiritual and economic benefits from repeated interactions within the sect were delayed.

VRC also imposed high exit costs upon the Skoptsy. Importantly, unlike many religious groups, such as the Romani (see, for instance, Leeson 2013a), the sect did not impose these costs from within. Rather, the world outside the sect did, as it considered castrates as “aliens” characterized by “ugliness” (Volkov 1936: 55). The main reason for such disdain is suggested by Nadezhdin (1845): the populace treated castration as barbaric and antiphysiological because it undermined the traditional family and the sanctity of the human body. Engelstein (2003: 96, 99) states that the Russian populace felt only disdain and disgust toward castrates. The Skoptsy were often met with shaming, shunning, reprimands, beatings, and mudslinging (Engelstein 2003: 76).

These punishments were credible, as the general populace had a cheap method of identifying the Skoptsy. The state-commissioned reports (see, for instance, Nadezhdin 1845; Pelikan 1875) contain information on distinguishing the Skoptsy via a particular set of features. According to Pelikan (1875: 34, 53–61), because they lacked key reproductive organs, the Skoptsy had a higher-pitched voice,¹⁰ their skin had a yellowish hue, their bodily hair was sparser (sometimes to the point that they had no beard or mustache), fat formed in their chest, and their thighs became wider. By the age of fifty or sixty, an average male member attained highly effeminate features. The findings of Pelikan are consistent with medical research on castration (Tandler and Grosz 1910; Edwards et al., 1941; Wilson and Roehrborn 1999), which finds a definite change in men’s appearance and features. This irreversible alteration made the Skoptsy relatively distinguishable in the general Russian public, which made it more difficult to exit the sect, as leaving the organization meant being plunged into a world of hostility. The unfriendly attitude and cheap monitoring of ex-Skoptsy created a lack of alternatives in the social world for those excluded from the sect. This enhanced the effectiveness of the Skoptsy’s boycott as a disciplinary device for facilitating in-group cooperation.

As a result of screening for patient and singularly devoted individuals, as well as imposing a significant cost of leaving the sect, the Skoptsy ensured a credible threat of boycott, which created an incentive to cooperate. In his state report, Nadezhdin (1845) characterizes the Skoptsy as suffering few intragroup conflicts, being bound by “ties of mutual respect, care, and support for each other.” According to reports on arrested members (Ryapolov 2019: 56), the sect’s cooperative drive was so high that it extended even to the direst of circumstances. During court trials, instead of informing on their colleagues, the Skoptsy claimed that they were castrated by a long-dead relative or an unknown stranger who drugged them. Sometimes sect members claimed they had no genitalia because of accidental physical trauma, such as being kicked in the groin by a horse or falling from a tree and rupturing their testicles and penis, which then had to be surgically removed.

Cooperation allowed the Skoptsy to establish a well-functioning system of mutual aid, unplagued by free riding and breakdowns in social order. The mutual aid was channeled through the Skoptsy ships. A ship’s helmsman regularly collected a share of the members’ income to maintain a mutual aid fund for times of community need (Volkov 1936: 32; Klibanov 1972: 86). The Skoptsy used their mutual aid fund to assist fellow members in starting up businesses with interest-free loans or, for the poorest of recruits, providing them with a job and a place to live (Inikova 2017b: 49–50). Volkov (1936: 32) writes that significant material support enabled many members to rise from poverty to wealth and become millionaires. The Skoptsy ships also aided one another with information. Because of its proximity to the Russian capital, the ship in Saint Petersburg could quickly communicate to regional ships information about legislative changes (Nikolskiy 1931: 421). The regional ships, meanwhile, exchanged information on prices, supply chains, and economic developments within various regions of the country, usually by sending messengers in the guise of Orthodox Christian missionaries and pilgrims (Chernysh 2014: 127).

Credible punishment through ostracism also allowed the Skoptsy to successfully collude in various industries across Russia and thereby amass substantial wealth. Usually, collusive arrangements fall apart because of chiseling and opportunism. However, the threat of boycott, supplemented by patience and high exit costs, facilitated collusive practices in the sect such as price fixing. As a result, Nosyrev (2013: 7) describes the sect as “one big, successful company.” Nikolskiy (1931: 421) characterizes the Skoptsy as a long-lasting, powerful economic union and notes its rapid creation of wealth. Volkov (1936: 32) writes that the Skoptsy had a knack for “profitable operations” and created a powerful merchant union.

The available historical evidence demonstrates that from the time of its inception, the sect required merely thirty years to establish a monopolistic hold on markets in many regions of Russia and beyond. Of course, survivorship bias may be present in the available historical evidence, as such evidence speaks to the most known events and most successful Skoptsy members and thus must be treated carefully. Nevertheless, the evidence at the very least points to significant success that the sect at times achieved through market collusion.

One report, written by Nizhniy Novgorod Governorate officials on the economic activities of the Skoptsy, concerns the sect’s

¹⁰ This effect was especially pronounced if an individual was castrated at a younger age. In Italy until 1903, such an operation was performed on boys to retain their high pitch for opera performances.

“coordinated action in the area of financial speculation” (Klibanov 1972: 93). According to the report, the Skoptsy “own millions of rubles and increase their capital annually . . . they monopolized the money and exchange trade not just in the capital, but around all Russia.” According to Aivazov (1915: 123), “Money exchangers in other cities . . . are always dependent on them.” The Skoptsy amassed worn currency and brought it to places with high demand for coins, such as the Nizhegorodskaya market fair, where worn coins would then be sold above their nominal value because of high demand. The report states that sect members regularly brought around a million rubles’ worth of worn silver coins to the fair and obtained at least 20 percent profits from their speculation.

The Skoptsy also monopolized bread markets in many Russian regions. Various ships from different governorates frequently communicated with each other about changes in local markets and coordinated their efforts to fix bread prices. The Skoptsy from Sarapul, a city in Vyatka Governorate, had “monopoly control” over bread supplies destined for Izhevsk and Votkinsk (Mashkovtsev 2010: 41). Furthermore, they established control over the bread markets in the neighboring Perm Governorate, primarily in Cherdynsk District and the city of Solikamsk (Mashkovtsev 2010: 41). In Yakutia, the Skoptsy controlled the bread markets from 1870 to 1900 and were a “threat to all the local and arriving bread sellers” (Klibanov 1972: 111). Iohelson (1894: 199–203) accused the sect of manipulating the bread market in Irkutsk, where in 1888 the Skoptsy resold vast quantities of bread for three times the price they had paid for it from the Yakutsk region.¹¹

The collusion of the Skoptsy merchants was also noted in the textile, cloth, and fur markets in Moscow. Wealthy Skoptsy such as the Podkatovys owned large textile factories in the city and engaged in coordinated price setting for their products (Nikolskiy 1931: 416–17).

The collusive unions of the Skoptsy spread abroad to Romania, where sect members dominated the market for coach riding in Bucharest and Iași along with the market for coach-based postal deliveries in Galați and Brăila. The average daily income of the Skoptsy coachman was around twenty-five to thirty francs, significantly above the pay grade of a regular Romanian coachman (Inikova 2017b: 49). Despite their monopoly on the market, the Skoptsy kept up a “high professional level” in this market (Inikova 2017b: 48). Their horses were expensive and kept clean, and the carriages were fully operational and properly repaired. The Skoptsy coachmen were friendly and often dressed to match their customers’ occasion for a ride. For instance, if the coach was hired for a funeral, the sect member put on a black belt; if it was for a wedding, the belt was white or pink. Usually, the Skoptsy coachmen dressed colorfully to attract clients. The Skoptsy also ensured the return of items their clients forgot in the carriage (Inikova 2017b: 48–49). Many of the Skoptsy coachmen thus maintained a loyal customer base, which substantially increased their incomes, enough for some to buy up to five estates in the center of Bucharest (Inikova 2017b: 49).

More concrete data on the Skoptsy’s wealth are also available. For instance, the Skoptsy merchant Maksim Plotitsyn possessed numerous barrels of gold and silver as well as bonds valued at ten million rubles in 1869 (Snigireva 2019: 85–86). Volkov (1936: 52) provides a list of wealthy Skoptsy in 1913, based on his dialogues with a member of the sect named Menshenin (see table 1).

Given Mironov’s (2012) data on Russian incomes in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, we can conclude that the Skoptsy were among the richest people in czarist Russia.¹² The logical question might arise of how the Skoptsy protected this wealth while being outlawed by the Russian state. This question may also point toward a point of tension in this paper. While identifiability by VRC facilitated the effectiveness of the Skoptsy’s boycott, it seems to have just as easily hampered the ability of the sect to function, as it made the sect identifiable by the state. While it is true that the state could monitor individuals with visible physical alterations, it was often difficult to legally prove that an individual belonged to the sect. Recall that the Skoptsy often spun fake stories about their VRC experience that were difficult to disprove. In this case, the sect’s presence was kept secret, and the member could pass themselves off as an unfortunate individual and be proclaimed as innocent by the judge (Ryapolov 2019: 59).

In cases where this was insufficient, Skoptsy ships bribed the state to induce it to not enforce its oppressive policies or to rescue their fellow sect members from the courtroom, using their mutual aid funds. Sometimes, one ship would even bail out members of another ship. Kutepov (1883: 407), based on his access to government reports on arrested Skoptsy, demonstrates that sect members “were not lazy about riding for miles away to find their colleagues and provide a bribe to a necessary government official for their release.” Unfortunately, no data exist about the size of these bribes. We know, however, that these bribes were, for the most part, very effective. Even though bribing added another cost to the Skoptsy’s religion, bribes often conferred additional benefits on the sect’s ships. For instance, from 1811 to 1818, the police were barred entry into the sect’s dwellings in Saint Petersburg without explicit permission from

¹¹ While it is possible the Skoptsy caused significant economic damage to the Siberian populace with their collusive market dealings, they were working as intermediaries and suppliers in an extremely harsh natural environment that many other merchants refused to service. Moreover, according to sect member Menshenin (Engelstein 2003: 174–74), the Skoptsy carried out their trade deals efficiently and without delay, thus allowing their counterparties to “never worry” whether the demanded goods would be provided on time.

¹² The wealth of the Skoptsy often exceeded the wealth of other popular outlawed sects. The Doukhobors and the Molokans emphasized communal life, equality, and noncapitalistic organization of production, which provided their members with lesser material gains. The Khlysty’s religion became confined to peasants in Orlov Governorate, and the sect did not enjoy much financial success in the nineteenth century. The Old Believers were the only religious group to approach the level of the Skoptsy’s economic success, as their faith did not disparage wealth accumulation. Many Old Believers in one strand of the faith became millionaires and enjoyed monopolistic status in various markets, predominantly in the textile, lumber, and fur industries (Raskov 2012: 78, 96, 299). However, the wealthy Old Believers had to pay double taxes to retain some civil rights and had to dress in accordance with government-set rules, which resulted in significant financial costs. Other strands of the faith—for instance, the Beguny—did not accept the Russian state’s legitimacy, proclaiming it as the manifestation of the antichrist, and frequently denounced their counterparts in the above-mentioned strand through polemics and letters of condemnation (Maltsev 2022). This religious pressure made the state-accepting Old Believers vulnerable to religious splintering and weakened the private mechanisms of governance within the group (Raskov 2014). Together, these factors frequently undermined the Old Believers’ wealth generation.

Table 1
The wealth of some the Skoptsy members in 1913.

Name	Wealth, assets
Nikiforovy brothers	1000,000 rubles
Pavel Burtsev	4000,000 rubles
Bumagin	10 stores selling cloth and textile
Boretskov	500,000 rubles
Ilya Bochentsov	400,000 to 500,000 rubles
D. (full name unknown) Lomonosov	Several million rubles

Source: based on Volkov (1936: 52).

the higher echelons of political power (Lukyanov 2018: 30).¹³

Wealth accumulated by the sect further permitted the Skoptsy to employ a complex inheritance system that conferred more benefits upon the sect members. Sect members appointed heirs from their ship, who would de facto become their new family and then be entitled to receive inheritance upon the legators' death. Alternatively, wealth could be bequeathed to the ship and evenly distributed among its members (Kholodkovskiy 1930: 29–31; Klibanov 1972: 84). Many Skoptsy took on the role of *komissioner*—an intermediary to whom one Skoptsy member could delegate the duties of running a part of their business (Koreeva 2018: 115). Such a system also helped the sect overcome Buddenbrooks syndrome, or the inability of economic organizations to survive beyond their third generation when they lack successful intergenerational transfer of assets (Lorandini 2015). The inability to produce progeny thus was offset by the inheritance system and the establishment of bonds within the sect. The threat of boycott ensured that these bonds would not be easily broken and that the inheritance would circulate within the sect, and it prevented opportunists from cheating the sect members of their wealth. Chief Procurator of the Russian Most Holy Synod Pobedonoscev (1905: 190) confirms this in his state report, mentioning that the inheritance system worked so well that the Skoptsy “never let inheritance slip beyond its [the sect’s] confines.”

4. Concluding remarks

Because of their relative success in informally securing cooperation, the Skoptsy outlasted the czarist regime and stayed active for the first decade of Soviet rule. However, once Stalin came to power, his administration began to demolish religion and markets. Imprisonment of priests and capitalists became the top priority for the Soviet regime. As a result, the Skoptsy suffered a series of blows that would prove fatal. To quote Ryapolov (2019: 60), the sect “became a relic of the past . . . and an enemy, which the Soviet regime had to fight relentlessly and eventually defeat.”

The Soviet regime engaged in a series of public trials targeting the sect. In 1929 the Skoptsy were tried in Saratov, where the sect members were accused of creating a “web” of speculation and controlled markets. In 1929 forty Skoptsy were tried in the village of Bolshoe Volosovo near Leningrad, and in 1930 twenty-seven members were found in Leningrad itself. According to reports by the Soviet police, wealthy kulaks and merchants led both communities. The Skoptsy were accused of preaching a dangerous religion, using private property, engaging in wage labor, and holding too many assets, from cows to tractors. Moreover, the Leningrad court accused the sect members of market collusion, turning it “into a well-tuned system, out of state’s control” (Panchenko 2004: 37). In 1931 the Skoptsy from the Moscow region were also sent to trial (Panchenko 2004: 38). The Skoptsy’s property was taken away, and many were arrested.

The Skoptsy that remained in Romania continued to prosper throughout the 1930s and continued their highly successful carriage-driving business (Inikova 2017a: 56; Fermor 2014: 322). However, with the advent in 1947 of rule by communists whose attitude to markets and wealth was similar to the Soviets’, the Skoptsy faded away from Romania as well.

Before concluding my analysis, it is necessary to consider an important development in some Skoptsy ships and a point of criticism. Data from Pelikan (1875: 143–44) and Inikova (2017b: 54) show that some Skoptsy ships admitted a very small number of women. The requirement for women to join the sect was to undergo religious genital mutilation. For women, however, because medical science at the time was less advanced, the aim of mutilation was not to curb their reproductive abilities but to make them sexually unattractive. Accordingly, the first seal for women was the removal of nipples, while the second seal was the removal of breasts.¹⁴

Many women found it beneficial to join the sect for reasons other than religious ones. For them, the act of genital mutilation could have prevented unwanted sexual attention and sexual violence since in Russia at that time “the law was slanted so that rape . . . was difficult to prove and unlikely to result in punishment even when everyone involved was convinced of the rapist’s guilt” (Antonova and Antonov 2018: 100).

Some women may have been drawn to the sect by the promise of rapid wealth creation. Volkov (1936: 52) shows that Skoptsy women attained great wealth: for example, the Smirnovy sisters, with five hundred thousand rubles and an exchange kiosk in 1913,

¹³ A follow-up question may arise: how did the Skoptsy avoid vigilante actions of the general Russian populace? The secrecy of the sect was useful to this end, but the market economy also protected the Skoptsy from the hostility of the outside world. The anonymity of the marketplace and the profit incentive made nonsect merchants less hostile to their Skoptsy counterparts, while markets monopolized by the sect often left individuals no choice but to interact with the Skoptsy.

¹⁴ A woman’s breasts would be tied up and then cut off with a long, sharp knife. Sometimes women would have their clitoris or labia majora removed as well. Full-fledged Skoptsy women were called “white pigeons” (Volkov 1936: 42–43).

and the Obukhov sisters, who amassed two million rubles' worth of wealth. Klibanov notes the wealth of Avdotya Bogdasheva, who owned a textile factory in Moscow (Klibanov 1974: 89).

Admittance of women into the Skoptsy was low because the sect's informal governance was geared toward men. Women, while enduring a similarly physically taxing operation, did not lose their reproductive abilities and did not undergo physiological changes as men did. Accordingly, Skoptsy women could leave the sect and still create a family. At the same time, they were also less easy to identify in public, which hindered the ability of the Russian public to monitor their presence and thus impose significant costs of exiting the sect. Accordingly, women had more incentive to leave the sect and act opportunistically. Evidence shows that women often left the Skoptsy to create families and birth multiple children (Ryapolov 2019: 55; Kutepov 1883: 398–99; Volkov 1936: 43), thus unraveling the cooperative arrangements in the sect.¹⁵

To conclude, I want to suggest possible research avenues for advancing my proposed analytical framework. The phenomenon of costly physiological modifications goes beyond the Skoptsy, appearing throughout history, from pagan cults of ancient times to modern-day Yakuza and street gangs. Applying my framework may be productive for studying these organizations. Another possible avenue of research is to focus on Russian history. So far, research on odd behaviors and informal collective action arrangements has only scraped the surface of Russia's rich past—especially its religious movements, which proliferated starting in the mid-seventeenth century. The country was home to dozens of sects during its czarist period, they secretly proliferated even in the Soviet Union, and in contemporary Russia they have flourished in full view. This creates fertile scholarly soil for case studies in economic history.

Data availability

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Data Availability

Data will be made available on request.

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¹⁵ The question may arise of why Skoptsy ships admitted women in the first place. We must not forget the religious roots of the sect, as some ships may have admitted women for purely spiritual, non-economic reasons.

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