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Glimpses of (Post)-Soviet Lifestyles

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editorial

When markets were opened at the turn of 1991–2, people in Russia were suddenly confronted with an exotic world of imported goods, as well as a whole new commercial imagery. In Russian townscapes, the place of the old Soviet slogans was often taken by pictures of the new goods or their producers' logos. Individuals' private spheres and leisure activities, their personal longing for happiness and success plainly ousted topics such as productive output or war and peace. These goods and images held out the promise of a new life, and did so with unusual flamboyancy.

All the new images and commodities, everything that came from foreign countries, were met with curiosity and approval, while all things Soviet, old and home-grown were derogated and derided.

15 years on, changes in Russia's social structure have diversified both the range of available commodities and images and the values according to which they are assessed. Observers stress, however, that many Russians are still unsure about their social status and affiliation. Thus commodities and images have an exceptionally important role to play as symbols of belonging and demarcation.

Old, home-grown things connected with Russian history have become a rich source of positive and very emotionally connoted images. Early in the post-Soviet period, the pre-revolutionary founding era of Russian capitalism with its developing bourgeois culture was rediscovered. Urban architecture, works of art and furniture dating back to this period are now used by a new wealthy class to emphasise their status. In this issue, the St. Petersburg-based author Larisa Shpakovskaya traces the history of this usage.

The Brezhnev era, by contrast, is being positively reassessed precisely because of its recency. It serves to enhance the image of older generations as mediators of worldly wisdom and savoir-faire. Reality, of course, is often at odds with these images. So what function do these clichés fulfil today? Ekaterina Kratasyuk offers an answer to this question based on an analysis of family images in the Russian media. And two articles by Tatyana Dashkova outline the Soviet traditions that form the backdrop to these new representations.

The foreign and the home-grown, the modern and the old co-exist and conjoin in extremely heterogeneous ways. Their syntheses reveal the extent to which people accept, resist or adapt to social transformations. The wealth of Soviet images currently circulating may signal that people are still looking for modern images and symbols to express certain attitudes, such as confidence and hope for the future, or experiences of continuity and reliability.

These images may be read as metaphors for something as yet unsaid; metaphors which, time and again, need to be decoded anew. And for lack of more precise terms, the numerous individual biographies and family stories related in the mass media also frequently function as metaphors helping individuals find their place in society.

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'Family Album' and Recipes for Happiness: Images of the Ideal Family in the Russian TV Commercials and Glossy Magazines

Yekaterina Kratasyuk

In Russia, the process of assimilating and appropriating 'Western' popular culture is largely completed. In the Russian glossy magazines and TV advertisements of the 2000s, the clichés and images of the 'Soviet' interact with the magazines' commercial forms and formats to create a symbolic local flavour and attract consumers, a majority of whom, according to surveys, are anti-American and nostalgic for Brezhnevian 'stability'. The difficulties in the visual representation of family are an expression of the vagueness of post-Soviet social norms. The outward diversity of family images in magazines and advertisements is in fact a cover for traditional family values with a puritanical and often sexist slant.

Family lies at the intersection between the public and the private, between the modern and the traditional, between norms and every day life and, in the Russian case, between the 'Soviet' and 'post-Soviet' cultural spaces. Representations of family reveal the norms and values accepted by contemporary Russian public opinion.

A look at Russian glossy magazines shows that they cover virtually the entire range of subjects typical of similar 'Western' publications – unsurprisingly, since most of them are produced by foreign publishers. Thus, beside the nuclear family and relations with grandparents, they discuss illegitimate children, conjugal infidelity, original ways of dealing with unfaithful partners and the families of businesswomen. However, 'traditional family values' remain at the centre of attention and enjoy the tacit approval of readers and editors, who favour heterosexual married couples where the wife mostly devotes herself to the family and the husband to business. Ideally, this should be a first marriage, with numerous progeny or at least two children. There are hardly any portrayals of homosexual families, and single fathers are mentioned rarely and only as amusing curiosities. The topic of sex and sexual competence, often discussed in magazines targeting 15–25-year old readers, is mostly treated under the rubric 'How to find and retain the ideal partner', usually meaning male partners. The thematic variety and apparent breaking of taboos reveals itself to be a cleverly constructed context in which the reader 'voluntarily chooses the model of the traditional family'.

Both magazines and advertising follow a pattern typical of all popular culture. A successful product must contain, on the one hand, a recognisable formula (the *convention*) and, on the other hand, an original rendering of the theme it reproduces, a significant deviation from the formula (an *invention*).

What is specific about post-Soviet culture is that here, the 'Western' and 'Soviet' patterns, respectively, function as the 'convention' and the 'invention', in a correlation that changes over time. In the early stages of perestroika, the Soviet patterns of the 1970s and 80s that were deeply entrenched in the public mind were the convention, which was supplemented with newly discovered American popular culture as an 'invention'. By the early 1990s the 'American' cultural patterns came to be seen as the norm, which accounts for the radical change in the cultural situation that has occurred in the 2000s. Today it is the American patterns, stereotyped as they are by glossy magazines and advertising, that must be seen as conventional.

It needs to be stressed that popular culture is not trying to reconstruct the Soviet family model: firstly, there had never been a single monolithic 'Soviet' model; secondly, for a long time discussions of family in the Soviet media imitated, and were even replaced by, 'industrial reporting' (see Tatyana Dashkova's article in this issue). Today 'Soviet' features are used as symbols that serve to lend an aura of 'authenticity' to well-tried com-

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mercial models. The use of 'Soviet' themes in glossy magazines is part of a pragmatic approach which exploits the Soviet nostalgia and the growing anti-Americanism singled out by sociologists as characteristic traits of contemporary Russian society.

The most striking examples of this tendency can be found in the glossy magazines *The Peasant Woman* and *The Woman Worker*. *The Peasant Woman* – 'the oldest Soviet magazine for women' – is no different today from glossy magazines for women financed by publishing houses such as *Good Housekeeping* or *Burda Moden*. Its title, however, is a symbolic trace of the Soviet era: not only does it endow the magazine with a certain aura; it also allows it to attract the growing body of readers who are wary of foreign popular culture.

The portrayal of families in the contemporary Russian media has certain didactic undertones, which a few concrete examples of 'ideal' families may serve to bring into relief.

Family, Brands and Family Brands in Russian TV Commercials

Advertising is a unique source of material for students of culture, since it presents the most typical and vital socio-cultural values in their plainest and purest form. An advertisement is not just a representation of social norms; it is also their most widely accepted visual expression. There are relatively few visual depictions of family in the printed press. This makes it especially interesting to examine the gallery of family images featured in TV commercials – not only because they are the most 'visual', but also because they appear on the most popular and influential medium for communication in contemporary Russia.

In recent years there has been a marked upsurge of 'Soviet' images and symbols in Russian TV adverts, although most commercials are still translations or imitations of foreign ads. Most interestingly, adverts that openly or indirectly allude to Soviet times usually broach the topic of family in one way or another.

It therefore comes as no surprise that TV commercials mostly feature 'Soviet-type' families – or, more precisely, families that correspond to a model developed by Soviet cinema in the 1950s–80s. A popular motif is the extended family: at least three generations – grandparents, their children and grandchildren – sitting around a large and festive dinner table. The décor in these adverts visually contrasts with the typical ambiance of ultra-modern homes with their painted walls, PVC windows and elements of a high-tech style. The 'family' commercials are set in rooms packed with old-fashioned furniture (including the obligatory large wall unit) and hung with wall rugs – in the style of nostalgic reminiscences about 'chic' Brezhnev-era décors.

One popular plot in such commercials is a story about an elderly person sharing his or her wisdom with a younger family member, suggesting they should try out the advertised item. Thus in an advertisement for *Mezim* stomach relief medicine, a grandmother during a family dinner recommends her son to take a tablet to enable him to get through the traditionally copious meal without damaging his health.

An interesting variety of this type of advertisement features families of stars. For example, the *Black Pearl* face cream is promoted by Vera Alentova, the star from the Soviet film *Moscow does not believe in tears*. In the first commercial, she utters a famous line from that film: 'Life only really begins after 40!', while in the second one she is shown with her daughter, the actress and TV presenter Yuliya Menshova, symbolising not only continuity but also the transmission of wisdom from the Soviet to the post-Soviet era.

The use of 'post-Soviet' stars in advertising is il-

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lustrated by a series of commercials for the *My Family* (!) fruit juices, where one of the leading actors from a popular TV series called *Cops* is shown in 'family' scenes. Although they are set in the present, the portrayal of family life in these commercials follows the pattern of the ideal 'Soviet' family, from the décor all the way to the fact that three generations of a family are living under the same roof.

A special advertising pattern related to representations of the Soviet past is the portrayal of elderly people. In these adverts, 'tradition' and 'wisdom' are combined with 'tidiness' and 'cleanness'. Thus, in a TV commercial for *Orbit* chewing gum, a cosmonaut is greeted by his mother upon his return to Earth; in an advert for *Beloved Garden* fruit juice, a grandfather teaches his grandson about natural ingredients; and in an ad for *Little Village House* dairy produce, a grandmother treats her grandchildren to 'real' milk.

This combination of the children's 'modern' world with the clichéd 'homely' sphere of the grandparents symbolises a link between the past, the present and the future. In keeping with tradition, 'true knowledge' belongs to the past.

Most of these advertising patterns are conspicuously free of the irony which experienced viewers expect from such syrupy images. There have recently been other examples, however, such as a commercial for *Skeletons* dairy produce featuring a 'cool granny' on roller skates, wearing stylish trousers, but not the requisite babushka-style headscarf.

Adverts that exploit images of the extended family, and in particular those involving grandparents and grandchildren, have a patent didactic purpose.

Images of 'modern' families which, instead of exerting authoritarian pressure on viewers, motivate them to imitate the advertised lifestyle, are much more rarely encountered in Russian advertising. Due to the translated commercials, however, the 'young family' is present on Russian television, meaning a childless, and probably unmarried, but cohabiting couple. Such adverts are set in spacious modern apartments of a kind which is not part of the everyday experience of most Russian families. These couples may be portrayed as having quite a sensual relationship: they are usually shown in a sleeping or bathroom, while extended families are typically filmed in a sitting-room.

From Krestyanka (The Peasant Woman), *June 2006: the cosmonaut Yelena Kondakova and her family*

A curious example of how puritanical 'Soviet' patterns are used in advertising may be found in a commercial for *Myth* washing powder: husband and wife are shown spreading out a clean sheet in their sleeping-room, before lying down on the bed and simultaneously turning their backs to each other with blissful

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smiles on their faces that are due to the powder's flowery aroma.

Problems of the 'Glossy Family': the Didactic Message behind the Verbosity

Russian glossy magazines, even those specialising in homes and housekeeping such as *House-Spirit* or *Hearth*, contain relatively few visual depictions of families. Photo editors apparently have difficulty illustrating articles on family topics: photos of women are most common, and there are few pictures of men and even fewer of children. Photos of male/female couples are also popular, but the most common arrangement features a sad woman's face in the foreground and, in the background, a man with his back turned on her.

The one exception is a group of glossy magazines that only started appearing a few years ago in connection with the current baby-boom in Moscow. These publications, with names such as *Childbirth.ru*, *9 Months* or *Mom and Tot*, are devoted to pregnancy and childbirth. They have introduced family photographs into the world of Russian glossy magazines. But even here most photos show a woman and her child, or sometimes three generations of women – grandmother, mother and daughter. There are relatively few photos of mother, father and children. Photos of fathers with children have recently become more popular, and one magazine even held a competition for the best 'Me and Dad' photo. Still, pictures of men as illustrations to 'family articles' remain something of a visual neologism.

Whenever mother, father and children are portrayed together in Russian glossy magazines, it is usually in illustrations to articles about families of 'stars'. These features stress that, despite a breathtaking career, their protagonist attaches special importance to his or her family. 'Stars' and 'families of stars' are portrayed as exemplary bearers of traditional family values. These articles adhere to a standard pattern: the star's childhood, permeated by love for his or her parents, is followed by a stormy period of youthful sexual intemperance when he or she committed some mistakes; then the star meets his or her future husband or wife, attains success and is confirmed in the opinion that family life and children are the most important things in life.

The content of articles on family topics is of course affected by the format of the magazines. Publications targeting 15–25-year-olds – the most influential of which is the Russian version of *Cosmopolitan* – devote much attention to the issue of conquering a (usually male) partner's heart, while magazines for 25–50-year-old women (such as *Caravan of Stories*, *Hearth*, *Lisa* etc.) teach their readers how to keep a family together. Sex is among the most discussed topics in the former group, who often print the word on their cover either in Russian or in the more 'neutral' English transcription. Magazines of the second type, by contrast, focus on 'feelings' and 'emotional problems'. The legal bases of marriage and divorce are also dealt with, although usually they bear a negative connotation as practical issues that are out of place in discussions of family matters.

An interesting variation on the family theme in Russian glossy magazines are economic or political weeklies' 'family pages', such as 'The Other Half ' in *Profile* magazine. This section presents the wives of successful businessmen, who are portrayed as their 'helpers'. The traditional family is thus construed as an indispensable element of a businesslike image.

Thus, although Russian glossy magazines deal with formerly tabooed topics such as sex, successful single women, homosexual families or single fathers with ostentatious openness, the didactic inference they encourage their readers to draw is that true happiness and well-being can only be

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found in the traditional, extended, full heterosexual family. Frivolous stories about sex usher in the conclusion that 'the best sex is in married life' or 'a genuinely sexy woman will never cheat on her husband'.

The image of the Russian businesswoman is reminiscent of the Soviet toiling woman who has earned the right to a full working-day but is also an excellent housekeeper, an exemplary wife and a caring mother who has no need for maternity leave because she gives birth to her children in-between labour exploits. Single women are seen as socially deficient: 'A true woman must always have a man at her side' (*Caravan of Stories*).

Glossy magazines are a lifestyle-producing type of advertising. The contradictory unity of family images in Russian glossy magazines blends nostalgia for the imaginary well-being and 'purity' of Soviet times with symbols of 'Western' prosperity. It is thus a testimony to the effects of several socio-cultural shifts which all took place in the space of one generation, expressing the protracted search for a cultural content 'of one's own'.

Translated from the Russian
by Mischa Gabowitsch

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READING SUGGESTIONS:

- Hilary Pilkington (Hg.), Gender, generation and identity in contemporary Russia, London/NY 1996
- Helena Goscilo / Beth Holmgren (Hg.), Russia – women – culture, Indiana 1996

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FAMILY IMAGES IN SOVIET CINEMA

Tatyana Dashkova

In the 1920s–50s, the family was virtually absent from magazines and the silver screen in the Soviet Union. Colleagues, fellow employees or factory co-workers – rather than mothers or fathers – would help young lovers sort out their relationship and find their place in life. Party officials, work brigade leaders, kolkhoz chairmen and shop superintendents would act as advisers and mentors (*Bogataya nevesta / UST: The Country Bride* 1938, *Svetly put / UST: Tanya* 1940, *Traktoristy / Tractor-Drivers* 1939[1]): the labour collective functioned as a 'family'. Children, family and everyday life had no part to play in this ideological picture, since they could not be entirely controlled. Matrimony was only depicted in a few rather scandalous films: a love triangle was shown in *Tretya Meshchanskaya / UST: Bed and Sofa*, actual and imaginary conjugal infidelity in *Tri tovarishcha / Three Comrades* 1935, and a husband's unmasking as a traitor in *Partiyny bilet / UST: Anna* 1936. The war (1941–5) caused a slight change in this state of affairs, adding the topics of female faithfulness and the importance of family values during that tragic period (*Zhdi menya / Wait for Me* 1943). Children, however, were rarely shown in cinema throughout the 1930s–50s. When they were, they usually served to illustrate the state's care for the young (*Tsirk / UST: The Circus* 1936). As an alternative, children (usually adoptive or foundlings) acted as

[1] The Russian titles are followed by a literal translation – or alternatively by an official release title if the film was distributed in the United States (UST) or the United Kingdom (UKT).

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touchstones of the moral qualities of an aspirant to the hand of an unmarried 'girl with child' (*Moya lyubov / My Love* 1940).

A radical change set in during the Thaw, in the late 1950s and early 60s. The family acquired a new status in Soviet cinema. Nevertheless, it continued to be seen as a miniature model of the country, which is why significant attention was paid to workers' dynasties, where, in addition to work skills, parents passed on ideological principles to their children (*Bolshaya semya / A Big Family*, *Ispytanie vernosti / UST: Devotion*, both 1954). However, during this period the family is treated not only as a primary cell of the state, but also as a complex system of human relations (*Dom, v kotorom ya zhivu / The House I Live In* 1957). Later films offered even more complex treatments of family: topics discussed in films now included social and psychological conflicts inside families (*Chuzhaya rodnya / Other People's Relatives* 1956), communication breakdown or hate between close relatives (*Predsedatel / The Chairman* 1964) and deracination (the films of Vassily Shukshin). Little by little, directors turned their attention to everyday situations previously banned from the screen: men leaving their families, divorce (*Ispytanie vernosti / The Test for Faithfulness* 1954) or female unfaithfulness (*Letyat zhuravli / UST: The Cranes Are Flying* 1957). For the first time, they analysed relationships between very young girls and adult men (*Chistoe nebo / Clear Skies* 1961), premarital relationships (*Devyat dney odnogo goda / Nine Days of One Year* 1962) and marriages of convenience (*Raznye sudby / Different Fortunes* 1956). School love (*Dozhivëm do ponedelnika / We'll Live Till Monday* 1968) and parental interference with teenage love affairs (*A yesli eto lyubov? / If This Be Love* 1962) became popular subjects.

Film plots were constructed around previously impermissible themes such as seduction (*Sverstnitsy / Contemporaries* 1959) and single mothers (*Chelovek rodilsya / A Human Being Has Been Born* 1956), with the latter being cast as a complex issue of choice and personality development. Children were also represented in radically new ways: they were seen as complex personalities who often suffered a tragic fate during the war (*Ivanovo detstvo / UKT: Ivan's Childhood / UST: My Name is Ivan* 1962). Directors therefore especially emphasised the ethical responsibility involved in adopting 'war children' (*Dva Fëdora / The Two Fedors* 1958).

In the late Soviet period (1970s–80s), cinematographic portrayals of family evolved in two directions: examinations of the country's tragic history through the dramatic fate of several generations

From Krestyanka (The Peasant Women), *June 1989: the first private farmers family of the perestroika era in the Smolensk area*

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of a (usually peasant) family in multi-part sagas such as *Vechny zov / The Eternal Call 1973* on the one hand, and deliberately small-scale dissections of relations within a family (*Chastnya zhizn / Private Life* 1982) on the other hand. These films deal with a very broad range of issues: one finds micro-studies of the complex relations between different generations of a 'normal' family (*Po semeynym obstoyatelstvam / Domestic Circumstances* 1977), observations on the cultural gap between urban and rural relatives (*Rodnya / Kinfolk* 1982), discussions of parents' right to interfere with the lives of their teenage children (*Vam i ne snilos / You Have Not Seen It Even In A Dream…*1981), reflections on the midlife crises of family men (*Osenny marafon / US/UKT: Autumn Marathon* 1979) and lifestyle options for single women (*Odinokaya zhenshchina zhelaet poznakomitsya / Lonely Woman Seeks Lifetime Companion* 1986).

In the late 1980s, perestroika, with its thirst for denunciation and emphasis on the negative aspects of Soviet reality, lent even greater poignancy to cinematic treatments of family. Several brutal films about hypocrisy and total lack of understanding between parents and children (*Kuryer / The Messenger* 1986) were released, where family conflicts were often explained by social causes: unsettled lives, poverty and cultural stratification (*Malenkaya Vera / UST: Little Vera* 1988).

Contemporary Russian cinema offers even more ambiguous treatments of relations between fathers and sons, as in the film *Vozvrashchenie / US/UKT: The Return* 2003, which won a Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival.

Translated from the Russian by Mischa Gabowitsch

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Reading suggestion:
Lynne Attwood, Red women on the silver screen. Soviet women and cinema from the beginning to the end of the communist era, London 1993.

Family Images in Soviet Magazines

Tatyana Dashkova

looking back 2

A comparison of the ways in which Soviet magazines and films portrayed the family reveals significant variety in theme and content under the veneer of unified Soviet ideology. Cinema, which targeted all sections of the population, treated family issues in a more complex way, but also with a more universal scope. The magazines were highly politicised yet visually dull: they were almost entirely colourless, printed on poor paper, and contained few and indistinct photographs. Discussions of family topics were virtually restricted to 'women's magazines', i.e. publications aimed at women and specialising in a range of areas that were socially branded as 'female'. Their illustrations (photos, drawings, reproductions of paintings and sculptures) tended towards visual and interpretative simplicity.

Most strikingly, the magazines of the 1920s contain discussions of free love, equal rights for women and the new way of life. Thus the progres-

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sive and therefore short-lived *Women's Magazine* (1926–30) treats the family as a legal way of safeguarding the woman and *her* children against 'irresponsible' male behaviour. It also offers advice on how to protect oneself against 'kitchen slavery', unwelcome sexual advances and unwanted pregnancy. *The Woman Worker* and *The Peasant Woman* take a different view: they see the family as an obstacle to work and social life.

The 1930s witnessed a drastic change of tone. The total ban on abortions (in 1936) brought the topic of motherhood to the forefront. The magazines begin to publish numerous photos of pregnant women, maternity hospitals and babies. Day care becomes an important topic, since Soviet women only had four months of maternity leave – two months before and two months after giving birth. Other frequent illustrations were photo collages and reproductions of paintings showing happy families: a smiling mother, father and child in a blooming garden or during a festive demonstration. The newly-created *Public Woman* – a magazine for wives of high-ranking officials – discussed the issue of women's participation in public life. This included, among other things, domestic help as well as schooling and pre-schooling. This publication was supposed to represent the model Soviet family – both by reporting on the socially useful activities of the wives of leading officials and by demonstrating the exquisite look of the new Soviet woman.

During the Great Patriotic War (1941–5) many magazines were suspended. Discussions of family issues resumed with the creation, in 1945, of a new publication entitled *The Soviet Woman* that showed Soviet women in both professional and private settings. However, private life was only portrayed through certain topics considered to be of national significance. Thus in the 1950s–60s the magazines started printing photos of families with children moving into new flats, shopping, or enjoying their spare time together. Popular depictions of domestic well-being included photos of large families, often with many children, sitting at a richly laid table or in front of the TV set. Another widespread motif was groups of neatly-dressed children in nursery school, classrooms or on playing or sports grounds. Once again there were photos of maternity hospitals and pregnant women, now also featuring the newborn's father and elder siblings. New themes included smiling brides and grooms and state marriage ceremonies or deliveries of birth certificates.

There were no major changes in the 1970s and 80s. Family issues were still discussed, albeit to a smaller extent, in 'women's' magazines: *The Soviet Woman*, *The Woman Worker* and *The Peasant Woman*. In addition to the earlier themes, there were now photos of marriages and the allocation of flats in 'youth-priority' blocks to young families or of families happily working together to build a house on a recently allotted suburban plot of land, or tending their vegetable garden. Coloured photo collages (with captions such as 'The bright world of childhood') showing laughing children, sometimes with their mothers, at play or on the beach, served as a new means of portraying familial happiness. Family conflicts and unhappy childhoods only began to be discussed during perestroika, most poignantly in *Ogonëk* (*The Small Fire*), a social and political magazine. Today Russian media devote more and more attention to family issues. They are discussed above all in family magazines specialising in topics such as birth, child care and the upbringing of small children (*9 Months*, *My Child*, *Young Family* etc). These magazines presuppose that *both* husband and wife participate in the process of child-bearing, birth and upbringing. The media market is also full of Russian versions of, or answers to, Western magazines that feature regular columns on family issues (including a *Peasant*

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Woman, which has been changed beyond all recognition, *City of Women* etc). They usually contain collections of practical advice, comments by psychologists and physicians, psychological tests and advertisements targeting families. These publications have developed a set of thematic and visual standards. Pre- and extra-marital relations (flirts, parties, leisure and sensuality) are usually the number one topic. Other important features are independent working women with children and demonstrations of happy patriarchal families. The latter theme, along with sugary photos of well-nourished babies, forms the corner-stone of modern magazine and television advertising.

Translated from the Russian by Mischa Gabowitsch

READING SUGGESTION:

Olga Issoupova, From duty to pleasure? Motherhood in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia, in: Sarah Ashwin (Hg.), Gender, state and Society in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia, London/NY 2000, p. 30–54.

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ANTIQUES, CULTURAL DISTINCTION AND THE FORMATION OF THE TASTES OF THE NEW MONEYED CLASSES IN RUSSIA

Larisa Shpakovskaya

Over the past decade, the social structure of Russian society has undergone significant changes due to various forms of class stratification that have been accompanied by a transformation of cultural tastes and a lifestyle-based segregation of social groups. Elitist styles of consumption have developed, and a new luxury industry has emerged to cater to them. Antiques are one such luxury good. The antiques market has grown vigorously since the early 1990s, reflecting the appearance of new social strata and new standards of consumption.

WHAT ARE ANTIQUES?

The term 'antiques' is loosely defined in Russian. In general, it designates old (usually pre-revolutionary) things that have some market value. However, this definition does not indicate what these objects have in common and why they are singled out as a separate class of things. My observation is that 'antiques' are those objects that have had a specific kind of 'biography'. All objects may 'live' through three biographical stages: practical use, depreciation and 'antiquisation'. Each stage corresponds to one socially sanctioned mode of perception and evaluation. All commodities typically go through the first two stages (things are used, wear out, and are finally thrown away). But only objects which, for some reason or another, become the property of high-status groups may reach the third stage. In other words, antiques endow their owners with a certain status, but their own status also depends on the social context in which they are consumed. This biographical approach prompts some new questions about the use of old things in Russian society: which social distinctions are indicated by the possession of antiques in Russia? If the transformation of the status of things in Western society may be explained through changes in class tastes, fashion, technology and the social positions of their owners, then what triggered similar changes in Russian society?

A BRIEF HISTORY OF ANTIQUES IN THE SOVIET UNION

In Soviet society, the process of 'antiquisation'

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began after the Revolution of 1917. A society which got rid of exploitation and privileges cast off the past and its material trappings. In the Marxist-Leninist world, pre-revolutionary objects were seen as out of tune with the spirit and requirements of the times. The system of state-directed distribution of goods stripped members of the former 'exploiting classes' – the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie – of all their privileges. In order to survive, they were forced to sell off their belongings. The old things were sold at spontaneously emerging and wide-spread flea markets (known as second-hand or junk markets) as well as in the state-owned Torgsin shops.[1]

Another reason for the social displacement of things was the creation of communal flats and the transfer of merchants' and aristocrats' stately apartments, furniture and all, to members of other social groups – workers, functionaries and the new Soviet intelligentsia. The state took a functional view of the old things. Pre-revolutionary furniture was expropriated and handed over to new Soviet organisations, or served to furnish the state-allocated flats of high-ranking officials and members of the new Soviet scientific and artistic elite.

The second half of the 1930s, and especially the post-war period, were characterised by a yearning for domesticity, privacy, calm and stability in everyday life. Things previously stigmatised as bourgeois and alien to the Soviet way of life became coveted objects. Armchairs, curtains, tablecloths and lampshades made a comeback into Soviet décors.

A massive shift in the perception of pre-revolutionary objects took place in the 1960s. This had to do with the emergence of new aesthetic currents and new ideas about the organisation of everyday life, which in turn were due to the political changes. The 1960s espoused a minimalist aesthetic in clothes, architecture, furniture and behaviour. This aesthetic was perceived as a cultural criticism of Stalinism; it fitted in with the general mood of progress, the striving for a new way of life and the struggle against everything seen as petty bourgeois. The old objects that provided the everyday backdrop to life in Soviet flats didn't simply cease to be modern; they became reprehensible. Having lost their value in the eyes of ordinary people, they were dumped as 'trash'. Antique, bulky chests of drawers, escritoires, couches and paintings were replaced with modern furniture and ornaments: folding sofas, narrow sideboards and trolleys.

Apart from the reform of everyday life, housing policies were another important factor that contributed to the changing perception of old things. In 1957, a building programme on an unprecedented scale was launched to alleviate the serious housing shortage. The 'Khrushchevian' flats were subject to stringent cost-saving requirements, and so they were built small. The new houses offered no room for the old furniture. The period cupboards, tables and buffets did not fit through the narrow doors and into the small kitchens.

Thus the pre-revolutionary objects not only became aesthetically unattractive; they also lost their utilitarian function. Old furniture came to be seen not just as 'unsuitable' and antiquated, but simply as uncomfortable. Nevertheless, due to the constant shortages, Soviet citizens kept this 'trash' in their flats – 'just in case' and 'it is a shame to part with it'.

The final stage of antiquisation began in the 1970s and 80s, and became especially evident in the 1990s. This phase in the life cycle of the old things must be seen under the aspect of class fragmentation. Closeness to the regime ceased to be the only basis for stratification; other factors now included money (income from the shadow economy) and the opportunities provided by access to scarce resources (connections or, in Rus-

[1] In 1931–6, Torgsin (a Russian abbreviation for 'trade with foreigners') was a nationwide network of shops where foreigners and well-to-do Soviet citizens could buy food and other scarce goods for hard currency.

sian, *blat*). In other words, Soviet society became increasingly differentiated.

This differentiation manifested itself in Soviet citizens' desire to diversify their styles of life and consumption. Even within socially and professionally homogeneous groups such as the intelligentsia, various forms of protest activities and cultural distancing emerged, expressed in the consumption of non-standard, old objects. The tendency towards distinction gathered momentum in the early 1990s with the development of a market economy and the emergence of entrepreneurs, capital, and rich people who were no longer hiding their wealth.

State cultural policies played an important role in the biography of antiques. State museums were created in the first years of Soviet rule. The state collections of paintings, china, furniture, weapons, jewelry etc. were housed in nationalised palaces and churches. The museums became an important part of official 'high' culture, and visits to them were a must for 'cultivated' Soviet people.

Antiques in post-Soviet Society

In the 1990s there was a growing demand for antiques, as evidenced by the growth of the antiques market. Thus, at the beginning of perestroika, Leningrad had three state-owned antiques shops; in 1990, there were already five private ones. By 1998, 45 shops had secured a licence to buy and sell antiques in St. Petersburg, and their number continued to grow. A whole range of specialised establishments emerged, from galleries dealing in highly expensive objects down to small and cheap shops, as well as regular auctions and annual antiques fairs. The press also reflected the growing interest in antiques. Glossy magazines devoted to leisure, style and décor began to carry permanent antiques sections. The impetuous development of the antiques market mirrored not only economic liberalisation, but also the emergence of new social groups in Russian society.

The reforms of the 1990s resulted in a thorough cultural transformation of the former Soviet society, including the appearance of new status positions, new styles of life and consumption, and the destruction of the old dispositions of cultural tastes. New elite strata emerged.

The practice of collecting had appeared in Soviet times as an officially approved leisure activity for people with different levels of income, education and professional standing; it was seen as conducive to the study of history and art. At the same time, merely furnishing one's flat with period furniture was denounced as profusion and hoarding and associated with a 'non-Soviet' way of life.

A new type of antiques collector made its appearance in the 1990s. It was made up of people who had recently reached a level of income well above the average and started to search for an elite consumption style of their own that would allow them to demonstrate their economic distinction symbolically. These new collectors became the main buyers of the most valuable and costly objects; their requirements and tastes shaped the demand and fashions on the antiques market.

There are two types of collectors. The first compile collections in the traditional sense of the word, i.e. sets of objects that share certain features – a widespread practice among elite subcultures. An even larger group buys individual antiques to furnish its homes. In elaborating their elitist style of consumption, the well-to-do strata adhere to models associated with status groups in other times and places, in particular contemporary Western elites, pre-revolutionary Russian merchants and aristocrats, as well as, to a certain extent, the Soviet intelligentsia (e.g. in collecting books).

Antiques make contemporary buyers partake of the era in which the antiques were produced and the statuses of their erstwhile owners. The

analysis

antiques are associated with 'the olden times'; they hark back to the styles of the Russian gentry, bourgeoisie and merchant classes of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In this way antiques symbolically transfer their former owners' status to their new masters. At the same time they serve as a means of cultural distinction, since they are associated with high culture, both of the pre-revolutionary and of the Soviet variety. In Soviet times they were sanctioned by the state through being displayed in museums, thus finding their way into the official, dominant culture. 'Museum-level' objects are the most highly rated on the contemporary antiques market.

The actual lifestyle of the well-to-do classes possesses a combination of different archetypes in the furnishing of their homes. In particular, antiques are used as individual decorative elements which may serve to supplement a décor in a different style. In St. Petersburg, the most expensive and prestigious residences are flats with numerous rooms located in Art Nouveau and Eclecticist houses in the city centre built at the turn of the 20th century. Some elements of the original décor (stucco moulding, balcony balustrades etc) are preserved, and thus antiques serve a purpose in making the décor comply with the architectural style.

The Formation of a Class Taste

The new collectors often lack the knowledge (about art history, styles, schools etc.) necessary for an informed purchase of antiques. They are therefore wary of forgeries and fraud. To avoid them, they employ experts – antiquarians or designers who advise them and select the objects. The experts contribute to a new 'corporate standard' of consumption among Russian buyers of antiques, which combines expert knowledge with the buyers' own ideas about 'beauty' and 'respectability'. This standard is based on the striving to consume everything that is most expensive and luxurious. It involves buying (or trying to buy) paintings by established artists who were popularised in Soviet times, such as Shishkin or Ayvazovsky. In terms of period furniture, the most popular styles are Art Nouveau and Empire, being the best-preserved pieces that combine a range of features that cater to the bourgeois taste: gilding, incrustation and a high level of craftsmanship.

This consumption standard, which has become a well-rounded style in its own right, is beginning to be perceived as the dominant fashion (along with some others, such as the high-tech style). The

The magazine Antiques, pieces of art and objects for collectors, *May 2006 issue*

desire to imitate 'the olden times' while maintaining a modern level of comfort produces dwellings of a new type. One example is a recently built elite housing estate near St. Petersburg where all houses are (sometimes reduced) copies of palace museums such as the Hermitage, the Catherine Palace or the Palace of Pavlovsk.

Glossy magazines devoted to design and décor (*Décor*, *Mezzanine*) begin to relay the dominant standards and tastes by publishing photos of the décors of flats and houses fitted out with period furniture or decorated with individual antiques. They thereby render these standards attractive to a majority of Russians.

The antiques market (shops with different price levels, brokers, restorers) redistributes things between consumers with different levels of income and knowledge, from the wealthiest elite groups down to a middle class that buys cheap (and sometimes forged) antiques to imitate the elite styles.

Thus the structural transformations of Russian society throughout the 20th century have contributed to the emergence of antiques as a special kind of commodity and a special type of luxury goods. Having been produced in pre-revolutionary Russia, the antiques found themselves in a different society without physically leaving the country. Nevertheless, since they have been involved in processes of class production and social distinction, they have not lost their status.

Translated from the Russian
by Mischa Gabowitsch

Author's note:

The article is based on research carried out in 1999–2002 which involved interviews with antiques dealers, experts and buyers as well as an analysis of official documents and press articles.

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kultura 7 (July) 2006 will focus on Russian drinking cultures past and present.