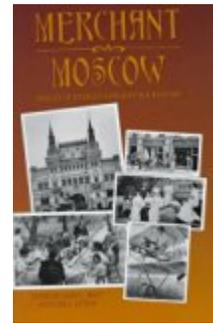


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

James L. West, Iurii A. Petrov, eds. *Merchant Moscow: Images of Russia's Vanished Bourgeoisie*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998. ix + 189 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-01249-0.

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## Portrait of a Living Culture on the Eve of its Death

Disjuncture is the great theme of Russian history. Often it occupies center stage in historical writing, and even when it does not, it hovers over the characters and plot, imparting a sense of tragedy or victory, of loss or gain, and imposing the most profound of explanatory challenges. In the collection of splendid photographs and accompanying essays collected by James L. West and Iurii A. Petrov, the revolutions of 1917 are not analyzed, but they are present on every page, as neither author nor reader can forget that the bourgeoisie in question ultimately “vanished.”

The heart of this book is a collection of over two-hundred photographs of the lost world of the Moscow merchants, most of them collected by Mikhail Zolotarev since the late Soviet period. A 1991 exhibit of Zolotarev's photographs in Moscow attracted the attention of West and Petrov and led to the present volume. Sixteen Russian and American scholars contributed brief essays, each explicating a group of thirteen to sixteen photographs of people, places, and advertisements. Although the rather artificial grouping of the essays does not add much to the volume, the format is successful. Each impressively brief essay offers illuminating commentary on the accompanying photographs and raises useful questions of interpretation. The felicitous combination of fine photography intelligently collected and cogent scholarly commentary make the book a joy to read.

Diane Neumaier, professor of visual arts at Rutgers University, describes the progress of photography in

nineteenth-century Russia, demonstrating that in this area Russians not only were not backward, but were, in fact, pioneers (p. 20). She offers a useful consideration of photographs as a source, reminding us that our ability to “read” photographs across great historical and cultural divides “should not blind us to the distance that the medium inevitably inserts between the reality it purports to capture and the ‘document’ it creates” (p. 23).

Thomas C. Owen briefly summarizes the subject he knows so well, the profoundly awkward legal framework in which Russian business operated in late imperial Russia. Despite the uniqueness of the business environment, the photographs accompanying this essay reveal more similarities than differences between Russian businessmen and those in Western Europe. Owen has done more to quantify ethnicity in Muscovite businesses than anyone else, but does his data really suggest a business community that was “distinctly foreign” on the eve of World War I (p. 33)? The number of foreign citizens among corporate managers in Moscow fell from 7.5 to 4.5 between 1905 and 1914, while the proportion of German and Jewish subjects of the tsar rose. While it may well be the case that to many Muscovites the latter two groups did not seem quite Russian, their increasing role in Moscow businesses might be read as a sign that some parts of urban Russia were growing more cosmopolitan and tolerant.

Irina V. Potkina's brief essay and the accompanying photographs capture this mixture of old and new.

A research fellow at the Institute of Russian History in Moscow, Potkina does not label the world of Moscow commerce as either “Russian” or “European,” but describes a living culture in which old and new elements co-exist. This “hybrid commercial system” (p. 37) included the grand British department store Muir and Mirrieles as well as the Easter Eve Fair at the Sukharev Tower and ubiquitous street vendors catering to shoppers too “lazy” to go inside the stores (p. 42).

Iurii A. Petrov’s essay is too brief to do justice to the subject of “Moscow City,” the banking and financial center of Moscow merchantdom. Petrov sketches the sources of popular animosity toward banking. His outline does chronicle the rapid growth, after a very late start in the 1860s, of a banking system that he characterizes as ethnically variegated and comparing favorably with Western business elites of the period in its level of professionalism and economic power (p. 50).

Christine Ruane provides commentary on the dress of merchants and their wives, as depicted in photographs stretching from 1860 to the early 1900s. In her essay entitled, “From Caftan to Business Suit,” Ruane offers the plausible argument that the changes in fashion evident in the photographs suggest changes in merchant self-image and an effort over time to adapt to an international standard of fashion and luxury. None of the men pictured is actually wearing a caftan, however, and apart from the Russian peasant-style hair and beards sported by some of the men, one wonders how much the styles here represented contrasted with those donned by people of similar stations elsewhere in Europe. The most significant change Ruane identifies here is the increasing interest in exhibiting wealth by the wearing of expensive fabrics and well-cut suits and dresses.

Another fellow of the Institute of Russian History, Galina N. Ulianova, provides one of the meatiest articles in the collection, addressing Old Belief, the dissident religious tradition to which the greatest of the Moscow merchants adhered through many generations. She provides a mass of interesting detail about the nexus between religious and business practices among Moscow’s leading families, as well as about the nature of the official persecution of these non-conforming Christians. Ulianova points to a promising field for further investigation by linking religious and economic ideas. She locates the source of much merchant philanthropy, particularly the endowing of churches, in the deeply embedded guilt at amassing a fortune through the labor of others. Ulianova recites the commonly held notion that, “‘nobody can ob-

tain a stone palace by working honestly,’” but observes that “this persistent attitude was clearly at variance with reality” (p. 66). In a collection preoccupied primarily with change, Ulianova describes one of the most durable features of the Moscow merchant identity.

William Craft Brumfield provides rich commentary for a set of stunning photographs, some of them his own, of commercial buildings, department stores, apartment houses and railroad stations. Much of the design is that of Fedor Shekhtel, who put his mark on merchant public and private buildings more than anyone else. This architectural legacy is probably the most enduring one left behind by the vanished merchants. Joseph C. Bradley also goes looking for evidence of the public lives and civic interests of this purportedly private caste, and finds much of it. “After hours” Moscow businessmen subsidized and gave their energy to an impressive array of artistic, scientific and civic institutions and societies. It is surely true, and should be more widely acknowledged, that “in their leisure as well as in their business and political activities, the merchants ... shaped a national identity of the future” (p. 140).

Several of the essays and photographs open windows into the personal lives of merchant families. Karen Penner, a descendant of the Morozovs, offers family pictures and tales of one of the more remarkable families to be found in any country. Muriel Joffe and Adele Lindenmeyr test prevailing literary characterizations of merchant wives and daughters as benighted and oppressed and find them “misleading” for the early nineteenth century and “anachronistic” for the latter part of the century. Over the course of the nineteenth century, merchant women, like their counterparts elsewhere, were more likely to exert control over whom they married, had fewer children, and assumed a more public role both in their families’ businesses and in philanthropic activities.

Sergei V. Kalmykov, also of the Institute of Russian History, raises intriguing questions in his brief essay on commercial education. He asserts plausibly that Russian commercial education at the turn of the century “clearly met world standards and sometimes even surpassed them” (p. 114), but cites evidence that graduates of such schools, which were generously endowed by Moscow businessmen, had no particular advantage in achieving high commercial positions. The elite of the Moscow business community did not value commercial education, and refrained from sending their own children to such schools. Kalmykov concludes that such indifference to education boded ill for the long-term success of

the business profession in Moscow. He further contends that at the turn of the century more and more scions of the great Moscow business families were embracing non-business pursuits such as acting and art patronage. This cultural flowering might be read as an abandonment of the Moscow merchants' role as leaders of native Russian capitalism (p. 115).

Edith W. Clowes, one of the few non-historians among the contributors to this volume, offers a very rich reading of this merchant interest in the theatre and theatricality. The interest of merchants in theatre evidenced by such patrons, actors and playwrights as Savva Mamontov, Konstantin Alekseev (Stanislavsky) and Anton Chekhov was related to the merchant need to create and present a positive identity to a hostile world. On stage and in life, merchants were concerned with how to correct the image of the wretched merchant wife, how to reconcile wealth with virtue, and how to assert their position among the country's elites. They also sought to break out of their intensely private world into "a time and space in which they would act as the hero and enjoy a large measure of legitimacy and authority" (p. 157). While merchant efforts to create a brilliant visual culture impress Clowes, ultimately she characterizes them as inadequate to the task at hand, for a would-be "ruling class" needs words more than images. Too little and too late were the verbal defenses of capitalist economic activity. In an era when "writing culture" was a more powerful carrier of ideology than was visual expression, the merchants fatally lacked "a cohesive rhetoric of public self," remaining "tongue tied," like Chekhov's Lopakhin, to the end (pp. 158-159).

Almost all of the articles in this collection address cultural motifs, and demonstrate the richness of this kind of analysis. Mikhail K. Shatsillo points toward political questions, however, in his brief consideration of labor relations in merchant Moscow. In an insight that is as significant as it is obvious, he points out that the merchants and their employees shared a common origin in the peasantry. Most of the greatest merchant families had peasant roots, and the founders dressed, spoke and lived as the peasants did. "They were distinguished only by their enterprise, their energy, and sometimes their luck" (p. 86). Common origins did not ease labor relations, however, "for life itself drove these two groups in opposite directions" (p. 89). The merchants' notion of themselves as the fathers and liberators of their workers persisted, however, and rendered them sharply hostile to protective labor legislation from the state.

James L. West provides introductory and concluding remarks, as well as an essay on the liberal vision of leading early-twentieth-century magnate Pavel Riabushinsky. While more and more studies of businessmen and industrialists in imperial Russia are appearing, it is still far from superfluous for West to offer this depiction of a liberal Russian capitalist. We need to know that there were such people, because there were, and they were not all that scarce. Moreover, despite the proverbial and oft-cited fragmentation of the Russian bourgeoisie, which is asked to explain too much, liberal industrialists and financiers existed in all of the major business centers of the empire. Civic, as well as economic, liberalism might have been the thread that wove them together, and liberals of various stripes, whether agriculturalists or industrialists, were, as this volume attests, creating such civic and political institutions on the eve of the Great War.

As West's concluding remarks remind us, the great disjuncture of 1917 haunts our apprehension of the lives of these vanished businessmen and their families. The cultural evidence teased from these photographs and from written sources attests to a rich and living culture: that is, to a culture that, for all its attachment to an ancient piety and ancient traditions, kept changing to reflect the times in which people lived. There is nothing uniquely Russian about this balancing act: all cultures are made out of things both old and new. Can culture explain the fabled weakness of the Russian bourgeoisie? Much of the evidence amassed here attests not to weakness but to strength and resiliency, though some of the contributors, such as Ulianova, Kalmykov and Clowes, suggest real limits to what the merchants could achieve politically.

We probably need politics, too, to account for the weakness of the bourgeoisie. Indeed, as the stories here presented suggest, this "weakness" may not have been primarily internal, but external. After all, in 1914, the Russian bourgeoisie was not the smallest or the weakest in all the world. Russian industry, commerce and banking all were growing rapidly. Among these businessmen were articulate liberals and astute analysts of Russian conditions. In spite of all the references to disunity and fragmentation, two broad and important consensuses were emerging in Russian educated society: for industry and against autocracy. In both of these, businessmen took the lead and provided leadership. But many, many Russians did not like them. And in the unprecedented, and never repeated, chaos created by the Great War, the political leadership of Russia's merchants and entrepreneurs was rejected. Maybe it was not their

fault.

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