

Louise McReynolds. *Russia at Play: Leisure Activities at the End of the Tsarist Era.*
Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003. x + 309 pp. \$36.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8014-4027-4.



Reviewed by Lynn Sargeant

Published on H-Russia (May, 2004)

I teach a class on Russian popular culture in which I make a strenuous attempt to connect politics and leisure activities in a perhaps misguided effort to convince students that the things people do for fun are not frivolous. As a student once pointed out to me, however, not everything has to be about politics. Culture and entertainment are important in their own right, as Louise McReynolds's recent monograph, *Russia at Play*, clearly demonstrates. Although the book is more an initial foray into the diversity of nineteenth-century Russian popular culture than a definitive treatment, it articulates a broad agenda for the further study of prerevolutionary cultural life.

McReynolds's study is not, of course, the first to explore this terrain. Scholars such as Richard Stites, James von Geldern, Denise Youngblood, and others have looked in detail at various aspects of late imperial, revolutionary, and early Soviet popular culture. McReynolds herself has collaborated with von Geldern on *Entertaining Tsarist Russia* (Indiana University Press, 1998), a rich collection of translated documents exploring the cultural milieu of urban Russians before the

revolution. Despite these efforts, cultural life, whether folk culture, urban mass culture, or the fine arts, remains an underresearched field in Russian history. This field, moreover, remains burdened by too many unquestioned theoretical, historiographical, and methodological assumptions, many of which are legacies not only of the Soviet era, but of the nineteenth century.

Russia at Play, in this context, is a breath of fresh air. A study of urban popular culture in pre-revolutionary Russia is, by definition, a study of the development of the way of life, values, and self-conception of the emerging middle classes. McReynolds's conclusions challenge those reached by other scholars of the Russian "middle," whose political and economic analyses of the middle classes have relied on an analytical paradigm that fits Russia poorly; this paradigm depends on the emergence of a "specific type of economy (free market)" coupled to a "particular political system (electoral and representative)." As a consequence, we became trapped in a cycle where analysis of Russian development was always conditional on its deviation from Western European structures

and patterns. This body of research was driven by the need to explain Russia's "failure" to develop "normally," along the Western European trajectory. Always lurking in the background was the perceived failure of the middle classes to create political institutions capable of taking power with the collapse of the autocracy. The consequence of this approach was to make the middle classes victims "of a self-fulfilling prophecy according to which their primary historical significance became predicated on institutions they never built" (p. 3). McReynolds looks instead at leisure and entertainment, those very modern activities, to understand how the middle classes defined and imagined themselves in both public and private. This approach lends itself to a better appreciation of the evolution of the Russian middle classes and allows "changing notions of self and society" to be more easily perceived (p. 4).

As McReynolds points out, intelligentsia cultural values shaped the identity of the middle classes and structured their leisure activities. The cultural hegemony of the intelligentsia has been remarkably persistent. Its values, especially the fetishization of highbrow culture, continue to influence Russian cultural life. More to the point, as McReynolds argues, they have penetrated and pervaded much of the historical literature, providing both a "frame of political reference and a stock of common symbols" (p. 8). For the emerging middle classes of the Russian Empire, the dominance of intelligentsia values fueled their sense of status anxiety and prompted extensive imitation of the artistic and literary vocabularies and styles of their purported cultural superiors. Simultaneously, the Russian middle classes engaged in the invention of leisure time, that is, time devoted to moral development through the arts, which better reflected their own class values.

McReynolds structures her work topically, rather than chronologically, a strategy which allows her to investigate a wide range of leisure activities. This approach provides the reader with a

good sense of the diversity and glamour of urban cultural life, but sacrifices, to some extent, a sense of the pace and intensity of the process of cultural diversification. The topics addressed here, including the legitimate and commercial stages, sport, tourism, nightlife, and the movies, all present considerable scope for additional research. Each of the chapters here, and many of the sections within them, could easily serve as the basis for full-length studies.

McReynolds devotes particular attention to the theatrical world. Despite recent studies of the theater by Anthony Swift and Murray Frame, among others, the stage remains in need of further study. McReynolds's two chapters offer a nuanced survey of theatrical life but lack the space for a truly substantive analysis. She reads the plays current at the time as mirrors of Russia's changing social hierarchy and the growing power of the new commercial class. Following the work of arts historian Ira Petrovskaja, McReynolds explores the life of the provincial stages. As McReynolds correctly points out, the provinces were central, not marginal, to theatrical life in the prerevolutionary period. The theatrical press circulated nationally, keeping residents of provincial cities well informed about the latest plays, their favorite stars, and the best scandals of the season. Touring companies brought much of the glamor of the St. Petersburg and Moscow stages to the hinterland and a well-developed network of provincial theaters and their stars helped to satisfy provincial desires for a rich cultural life. However, such a short discussion (less than two pages) can only hint at the complexities and significance of provincial culture. More broadly, as McReynolds narrative clearly demonstrates, the development of Russian theatrical life in the 1880s and 1890s challenges some of our standard conceptions of the relationship between the state and society during the reign of Alexander III. The traditional view of the period as one of "stagnation" in the arts is far too simplistic. It cannot cope with the highly creative strategies employed by

artists, playwrights, and theatrical entrepreneurs as they responded to changing political tides.

McReynolds offers her readers an entertaining and illuminating account of the growing importance of sport to prerevolutionary society. She tackles the transformation of horse racing from an activity for the noble elites to one for a broad--and betting--crowd of middle-class enthusiasts, as well as hunting, soccer, bicycling, and even women's sports. A discussion of the invention of physical education and the drive to include sport as an element of the school curriculum reflects not only changing conceptions of health and leisure, but also ongoing debates on the purpose and practice of education. Athletic societies and clubs played roles in Russian society that corresponded closely to those of other voluntary associations. McReynolds argues that club membership provided members of the middle classes with opportunities to display their status and demarcate their identity. The democratization of sporting and club life that accompanied this process changed the meaning and the practice of previously elite activities. Members of the middle class engaged in new leisure activities in an effort to raise their status, self-consciously borrowing the pleasures of their perceived superiors. Whatever their intent, relaxed membership standards often resulted in clubs, such as the Petrovskii Yacht Club, that usually appeared "on the police blotter rather than in the social columns" (pp. 96).

In some ways, chapter 4, "The Actress and the Wrestler," is the most satisfying of the book. It extends the discussion of both the theater and of sport, offering a nuanced analysis of gender as a structural component of leisure time. McReynolds uses the careers and personalities of the actress Maria Savina and the wrestler Ivan Poddubnyi to explore how popular culture created and reinforced modern gender norms and stereotypes. At the same time, other entertainers, including male and female impersonators and cross-dressers, exploited new opportunities to play upon the raw

edges of gender boundaries, in the process throwing the gender politics of the period into sharper relief.

McReynolds also explores the development of tourism within Russia and the growing attraction for middle-class Russians of tours abroad. Although this material is interesting and well-presented, a comparative perspective would have been particularly helpful here. It is hard to get a sense of how typical, or unusual, Russian tourists and tourism were. That said, McReynolds offers an insightful assessment of the relationship between domestic tourism and middle-class Russians' understanding of themselves as citizens of an empire, forging into the exotic landscapes of the borderlands in search of adventure and entertainment.

Two chapters outline the settings, cast, and texts--the songs, dances, and costumes--that gave urban nightlife its particular flavor. McReynolds traces the transition from traditional street fairs (gulianii) to modern nightclubs, a process which fundamentally restructured the twilight world of leisure. Nightlife, as she notes, was strongly delineated along gender lines. Social restrictions initially deterred respectable women from enjoying the offerings of the tantalizing new clubs. At first, only those "professionally" engaged as women could move freely in this world. As nightlife became both more fashionable and more diverse, however, women began crossing this border along with many others in Russian public life, causing considerable anxiety about the moral and sexual health of society. The final chapter traces the development of prerevolutionary cinema as a social phenomenon. McReynolds evocatively describes not only the film industry and its products, but also the audience, the movie palaces they frequented, and the stars that captured their attention. In the process, she brings the world of the Russian middle classes back to life.

Russia at Play opens up new horizons for the analysis of prerevolutionary cultural life. The the-

oretical framework, although appropriate, sometimes seems a bit forced. This can distract the reader from the flow of the narrative, which has the unfortunate effect of undermining the persuasiveness of the analysis. McReynolds's brief bibliographic essay suggests not only points of entry for further research, but also highlights the need to refine the methodological and analytical tools for the history of culture/cultural history. As McReynolds notes, a sea of archival sources for cultural institutions and actors exists, but much of this material is unilluminating, repetitive, or difficult to work with. I would argue that the relative dearth of recent research in the field contributes significantly to the methodological obstacles facing McReynolds or any other individual researcher. Finding it difficult or impossible to follow the faded footsteps of previous scholars, each researcher is forced to blaze their own trail through the sources, at the cost of time and energy that might be better spent, for example, placing Russian cultural developments in a more effective comparative context.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-russia>

Citation: Lynn Sargeant. Review of McReynolds, Louise. *Russia at Play: Leisure Activities at the End of the Tsarist Era*. H-Russia, H-Net Reviews. May, 2004.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=9394>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.