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Women and The Market in Imperial Russia, 1700-1917

A persistent trope in Western gender ideology has been, in the words of Victoria de Grazia, “the dichotomized relationship between Mr. Breadwinner and Mrs. Consumer.”¹ According to this view, it was men’s “natural” role to produce the goods of the new industrial age, while it was women’s duty to purchase them. This assumption which pervades so much of Western economic history has recently come under the critical gaze of cultural historians, and the results of this ongoing research have been impressive. Attempting to write a cultural history of capitalism, historians have begun to analyze the role of commodities, retailing, advertising, spectatorship, and other aspects of consumerism in the creation of modern life.² Central to the concerns of these historians has been the role of gender. After years of seeing women as passive consumers of industrial goods, historians have a new appreciation of the active role that women played in creating modern consumerism. This new understanding of consumer culture has led to a more nuanced view of women’s complex role in the capitalist marketplace.³

 HIS history of modern consumerism provides a direct challenge to the dominant paradigms that have shaped Russian economic history of the imperial period. Much has been written about the Russian economy, and the story is not a happy one. Beginning in the eighteenth century, the Russian state attempted to modernize the economy by encouraging the development of modern industrial capitalism so that Russia could compete successfully with the other European powers. The state also played a singular role as entrepreneur and consumer of Russian industrial goods, especially coal, oil, and steel, thereby manipulating the Russian market to its own advantage. While this ferocious industrialization drive allowed for substantial economic growth by the beginning of the twentieth century, it left in its wake an impoverished, land-hungry peasantry and an equally impoverished working class who toiled in some of the worst conditions on the European continent. The frustration that workers and peasants felt in their role as laborers led to the overthrow of the Romanov dynasty and its replacement with a regime that promised to create the world’s first socialist economy, an economy dedicated to allowing the laboring classes control over working conditions.⁴ As this quick summary suggests, discussions of Russian economic developments have centered on industrial and agricultural production and even ignored the role of consumption in Russian capitalism. At the same time, scholars have tended to favor analyses

of heavy industry where the state’s role was most critical. The result is a perspective of Russian economic developments that privileges production over consumption, heavy industry over light. Finally, this paradigm has been coded male, from the Ministers of Finance who created and implemented Russia’s industrialization drive to the industrialists who owned and organized production to the workers who overthrew this capitalist system.

This paradigm has not gone unchallenged. Olga Crisp has argued that light industry especially textiles and foodstuffs provides a counterpoint to state-sponsored industrialization. In these areas of the economy, industry was freer from government intervention and more dependent upon market forces. Perhaps more controversially, Peter Gatrell, Paul Gregory and others have suggested that agricultural production and peasant incomes did not decline in late imperial Russia despite heavy taxation.⁵ The work of women’s historians, such as Rose Glickman, Barbara Engel, Christine Worobec, and others have also attempted to revise our views of Russian economic development by analyzing women’s role in the urban and rural labor markets.⁶ And yet, as significant as this revisionist historiography has been, there are still many areas in need of study. To use the textile industry as an example, we still do not know what happened to Russian textiles after they left the factory. Where did they go? Who bought them? What did consumers do with the textiles after purchase? Until we analyze more thoroughly how

textiles or a myriad of other manufactured goods were consumed, we will only have an incomplete understanding of Russian capitalism.

Thus, the new historiography of consumerism provides Russian historians with a real opportunity to take a fresh look at economic developments in the imperial period. A number of historians are doing just that in their work on advertising, retailing, leisure, and the development of individual consumer industries.⁷ My own work has focused on the history of the Russian fashion industry and for the remainder of this paper, I would like to discuss some of my preliminary findings. Using the fashion industry as a case study, I will focus on the role of women in the development of the capitalist market in imperial Russia.⁸

Before I begin, let me say a few words about the development of fashion in the West. Fashion began at the Burgundian court in the late medieval period. Most historians agree that at that time members of the French court began to change their clothing styles simply for the sake of change.⁹ This new attitude toward clothing quickly spread to other European courts as a way for wealthy elites to display their economic and cultural power. The popularity of fashion led to the expansion of textile production and the development of hierarchical and ritualized labor practices that constituted custom tailoring and dressmaking. During the early modern period, even ordinary Europeans began to wear less expensive, modified versions of the latest fashions as their budgets allowed.

It was this system of clothing production and attitudes toward clothing that Peter the Great introduced in 1701. With his edict ordering his court and officials to dress "in the German style," Western European designs, technology, and attitudes toward clothing which had entered Muscovy even before Peter's reign now became the dress code for public life.¹⁰ While the tsar and his family could rely upon Kremlin tailors to make their European clothing for them, everyone else had to find some other means to acquire their new clothes. Recognizing the problem that he had created, the tsar acted to ensure the success of his sartorial revolution. First, he introduced Western-style uniforms for his court, military, and bureaucracy, and insisted upon French fashions for women at public gatherings, thereby habituating Russians to European clothes. Second, Peter encouraged the production of domestic wool, silk, and linen. Third, the tsar provided financial incentives for those European artisans willing to leave their native lands and practice their craft in Russia. Having established themselves in their new home, these artisans could then train Russians in the fine

art of tailoring and dressmaking.¹¹ Although these early years of the Russian fashion industry seem to fit the pattern of state-sponsored economic development, Peter's decrees resemble those of other European monarchs who encouraged their aristocracies to dress in sumptuous clothing. Perhaps more importantly, by the mid-eighteenth century the Russian elite no longer needed government prodding to wear European clothes. By the second half of the eighteenth century, the Empresses Elizabeth and Catherine II felt it necessary to pass sumptuary laws curtailing excessive sartorial display at court.¹² Within a generation, the Russian elite had grown comfortable in their new clothes.

At the time of Peter's dress revolution both elite men and women were active consumers of fashion. However, beginning in late seventeenth-century England, aristocratic men began to abandon luxury in their dress and adopted a simpler, more austere costume. This male renunciation of luxurious dress became a defining feature of modern masculinity and was worn all across Europe, including Russia. "Real" men were supposed to purchase and wear their clothes with a minimum of fuss and care.¹³ As men's public role as consumers of fashion receded, capitalist entrepreneurs focused their attention on women as a way to expand the fashion market. In Russia, as elsewhere, the fashion industry became increasingly interested in creating and publicizing changes in women's fashions as a way of encouraging further consumption. This created an opportunity for women to participate as both producers and consumers in the creation of a market for European fashions.

The Russian fashion industry, following the European model, developed two distinct forms of clothing production, custom tailoring and dressmaking and ready-to-wear. The first to appear was the bespoke trades. It took little capital for a seamstress to open a fashion atelier. She only needed a few pairs of scissors, pins, a measuring tape, and access to information about the latest fashions. The chief expense was rent—it was important to find a few rooms in a shopping area that would encourage a respectable clientele. As the business grew, dressmakers would hire apprentices and journeywomen to help them keep up with consumer demand. Although much of the information about these early female entrepreneurs has been lost, data from the 1869 St. Petersburg census demonstrates the prominent role dressmakers and their female employees had in Russia's fashion capital. In that year approximately 9,000 men listed their occupation as garment workers, while the number of women employed was more than 9,600.¹⁴ By the beginning of twentieth

century, women designers ran a number of prominent fashion houses. Ol'ga Bul'benkova and Anna Gindus provided women in Petersburg with haute couture, and in Moscow Nadezhda Lamanova drew rave reviews for her clothing designs.

Meanwhile, the 1850s and 1860s witnessed the development of the second form of clothing manufacture—ready-to-wear. The invention of the sewing machine, drafting systems and tools, and inexpensive textiles allowed manufacturers to set up sweatshops where garment workers made inexpensive copies of fashionable clothes that could be sold “off the rack.” The critical moment in the development of ready-to-wear in Russia came in 1881. In that year the Russian government raised import duties in response to the protectionist tariffs found all over Europe. These tariff wars encouraged an Austrian ready-to-wear firm to open a Russian operation so that they could advantage of the vast Russian market. The Mandl' Company set up a huge network of sweatshops in the city of Moscow and in the surrounding villages of Moscow and Riazan provinces. Russian manufacturers quickly followed Mandl's lead. However, unlike dressmaking, there were no female entrepreneurs among Russia's largest ready-to-wear firms. These businesses required significant capital and business acumen to coordinate wholesale and retail operations with a network of sweatshops. Thus, at a key point in the development of the fashion industry women entrepreneurs apparently either did not want or were not encouraged to take the financial risk of establishing such large manufacturing enterprises. Women made their mark as owners of exclusive design houses, not as manufacturers of ready-to-wear.

Much of the labor force that actually sewed the clothes in either sector of the garment trades were women. In Moscow which became the center of the ready-to-wear industry, two out every three garment workers were women by 1912.¹⁵ The reasons for this feminization of the garment trades are not hard to find.¹⁶ In 1764 Catherine the Great introduced her model curriculum at Smolnyi. This curriculum, adopted from French models, was intended to prepare young women to become mothers and household managers. To accomplish this, sewing became a mandatory class for all students, no matter what their social rank. From that time on, all Russian girls' schools included a sewing requirement while there was no such vocational skill required of all male students. Educators believed that women's ability to sew meant that they would be able to provide clothing for their families and earn a living, if necessary. This gendering of sewing touched even those who did not have the opportunity to attend school. Because sewing was now associated with women's work, men could not

become needle workers without a loss of their masculinity. The result was a slow erosion of the prestige that had once belonged to the trade. Ready-to-wear manufacturers took advantage of this situation. They insisted that their workers were semi-skilled at best and paid them accordingly. Even though the fashion industry was expanding in late imperial Russia, few workers could support their families with the wages they received. The men who worked in custom tailoring became angered as they saw their dreams of a brighter future as respected craftsmen eroded by the feminization of needlework and the rise of ready-to-wear. These men expressed their anger and frustration in the strikes, demonstrations, and work stoppages that rocked the fashion industry in the early years of the twentieth century.¹⁷

Clothing production was only one part of the development of a European fashion industry in Russia. Another challenge for the industry was to consolidate and expand upon the desire to wear Western dress. Because fashions changed quickly, speed was essential in disseminating fashion news. The solution was the creation of the fashion magazine.¹⁸ During the eighteenth century, Russians learned about the latest fashions by reading foreign periodicals, but this proved too slow for Russian fashionistas. This gave some enterprising individuals the idea of starting fashion magazines to create a forum for experts who would recommend French fashions for a Russian market and establish the legitimacy of a domestic fashion industry.

This first generation of Russian fashion magazines appeared in the 1830s. Male and female publishers who also served as editors used the French fashion magazine as their template to create periodicals that provided fashion news, light reading, and household hints for a female readership. Publishers hired a number of women as columnists, thereby creating employment opportunities for educated women in Petersburg and Moscow. We know very little about the personal circumstances of women publishers. Elizaveta F. Safanova was the wife and later widow of a minor government official with three children to support. Olympiada Riumina had important connections to the imperial court. Sofia Mei was an author and translator. Whatever their reasons, these women published journals such as *Vaza*, *Moda*, and *Modnyi magazin*. In order to encourage subscriptions, publishers experimented with early marketing strategies such as advertising, and providing free patterns and supplements to its readers. These magazines proved very popular and were instrumental in enhancing Russian elite women's self confidence as consumers of haute couture.¹⁹

In the mid-nineteenth century the Russian fashion magazine entered into a new phase in its development. Mechanized printing presses and

chromolithography came to Russia at that time and allowed publishers to increase print runs and the number of illustrations without significantly raising the cost of the magazines. The older magazines quickly lost subscribers to these new publications. In 1870, only three years after its creation, *Novyi russkii bazar*, a translation of the German periodical, *Der bazar*, had 6,000 subscribers while its closest competitor, Sofia Mei's *Modnyi magazin* had 5,000, and Safanova's *Vaza* had only 2,000.²⁰ By the mid-1870s another translated magazine, *Modnyi svet*, came to dominate the Russian fashion market. Herman Goppe, the magazine's publisher, had come to Russia from Westphalia and made his reputation as a publisher of technical works and highly-illustrated periodicals such as *Vseobshchaia adresnaia kniga S-Peterburga* and *Vsemirnaia illiustratsiia*. His chief rival for the fashion market was Nikolai Alovert, a former employee of Goppe's, who also published technical publications and illustrated magazines such as *Vestnik mody*. It was these technical and administrative skills that gave Goppe and Alovert a distinct advantage over their competitors and made it more difficult for women publishers to continue in the fashion press.

This emphasis on the technical aspects of publishing brought about an important change in the magazines themselves.²¹ Although the news from Paris might reach Russia more quickly due to the technical prowess of Goppe and Alovert, neither man ever wrote a fashion column. *Novyi russkii bazar* and *Modnyi svet* were translations of European fashion magazines. There were no Russian experts to advise their compatriots what to wear because foreign correspondents wrote the articles. The direct and intimate link between Russian fashion publishers and their readers was lost in favor of a more cosmopolitan, "European" tone. But it was precisely this cosmopolitan tone that Russian women liked in this new generation of magazines. Every woman who sewed a skirt, baked a cake, or fashioned a hat based on information acquired through the fashion press could feel herself to be a part of a cosmopolitan community of women who shared the same interests and tastes.

Fashion, like war and politics, was news and Russians were eager consumers. In 1895 the Censorship Administration reported that over 34,000 individuals subscribed to the four leading fashion magazines.²² But, subscription rates do not tell the whole story for many women shared their magazines with friends and dressmakers. Furthermore, other periodicals and even newspapers regularly featured fashion columns or illustrations. The most popular Russian magazine, *Niva*, had a quarterly

fashion supplement which supplied patterns for the outfits and needlework described in its pages. By 1900 *Niva's* publisher, A. F. Marx, reported circulation figures of over 200,000.²³ Fashion news and illustrations proved to be a very powerful tool that all publishers used to raise subscription rates.²⁴ And perhaps, more importantly, the inclusion of fashion in the major periodicals of the time acknowledges the significance of the female consumer in the creation of a capitalist market in Russia.

As this quick overview demonstrates, women played an important role in the development of one of Russia's earliest consumer industries, challenging the paradigms of Russian economic history in a number of important ways. First, the Russian state played a role similar to other European governments in its support of the fashion industry. It raised and lowered tariffs, it created a curriculum that essentially made all women potential garment workers, but these were measures that Western European governments enacted as well. While it is true that the industry began by government fiat, market forces played a critical role in the development of the fashion, not the state. Indeed, Russian garment workers wanted more government supervision of the industry, not less, demanding that the government curb owners' exploitation of their workforce in both the bespoke trades and ready-to-wear manufacturing. Second, women's role in the development of Russian capitalism is much richer and more complicated than any simple dichotomy of men as producers and women as consumers will allow. Women designers, seamstresses, publishers, advice columnists, and consumers all gave shape to the Russian fashion industry. As the economy began to grow, women entrepreneurs began to lose ground to their male competitors. I have tried to suggest the reasons for this, but we need to learn much more about the obstacles that women faced in the business world. Finally, the Russian fashion industry was not a failure, but a success, a success on two levels. It encouraged Russians to give up their native dress, a process that began in the eighteenth century and continued uninterrupted into the twentieth century. For those who could not afford to transform their wardrobes immediately, the fashion industry encouraged these individuals to dream of a better life as members of a modern, cosmopolitan European community. This proved to be a very powerful dream, one that led Russian men and women to revolution and the overthrow of the capitalist system that created it. Perhaps, then, it is fashion's revolutionary potential as seen in the case of the Russian fashion industry that can broaden and challenge our understanding of capitalism and its impact on the world.

Notes

- ¹ Victoria de Grazia, ed., *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 3.
- ² The literature on consumerism continues to grow. In addition to the essays in *The Sex of Things*, see Erica Carter, *How German Is She? Postwar West German Reconstruction and the Consuming Woman* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997); Michael Miller, *The Bon Marché: Bourgeois Culture and the Department Store, 1869-1920* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998); Vanessa R. Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-siècle Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); and Rosalind Williams, *Dream Worlds: Mass Consumption in Late Nineteenth-Century France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982) for an introduction to this literature.
- ³ Erika Diane Rappoport, *Shopping for Pleasure: Women and the Making of London's West End* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).
- ⁴ For an excellent introduction to the important paradigms in Russian economic history and a thoughtful critique of them, see Peter Gatrell, *The Tsarist Economy, 1850-1917* (London: Batsford, 1986).
- ⁵ Olga Crisp, *Studies in the Russian Economy before 1914* (London: Macmillan, 1976); Paul R. Gregory, *Russian National Income, 1885-1913* (Washington: Catholic University Press, 1982); and Peter Gatrell, *The Tsarist Economy, 1850-1917* (London: Batsford, 1986).
- ⁶ Rose L. Glickman, *Russian Factory Women: Workplace and Society, 1880-1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); and Barbara Alpern Engel, *Between the Fields and the City: Women, Work, and Family in Russia, 1861-1914* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Christine D. Worobec, *Family and Community in the Post-Emancipation Period* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1995); and Beatrice Farnsworth and Lynne Viola, eds., *Russian Peasant Women* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).
- ⁷ I would like to recognize the pioneering work of Sally West and Randi Cox Barnes on advertising, Julie Hessler, Amy Randall, and Marjorie Hilton on retailing, Louise McReynolds' new book on leisure, Wendy Salmond's work on peasant women's handicrafts, and Alison Smith on foodstuffs. In addition there is a whole network of scholars who have worked on the consumption of film and theatre. Richard Stites, Lynn Mally, Denise Youngblood, Josephine Woll and others have written a number of superb monographs dealing with artistic consumption.
- ⁸ This paper is a summary of some of the arguments found in my forthcoming book, *The Empire's New Clothes: A History of the Russian Fashion Industry, 1700-1917*.
- ⁹ Francois Boucher, *20,000 Years of Fashion: The History of Costume and Personal Adornment*, expanded edition (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1983), pp. 191-2.
- ¹⁰ The decree can be found in *Polnoe sobranie zakonov Rossiiskoi imperii* (PSZ), vol. 4, no. 1887, p. 182.
- ¹¹ For a discussion of the development of textiles and artisanal trades in the eighteenth century, see Arcadius Kahan, *The Plow, the Hammer and the Knout: An Economic History of Eighteenth-Century Russia*, ed. Richard Hellie (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985). It was not until the mid-eighteenth century that a domestic cotton goods industry developed in Russia.
- ¹² PSZ, vol. XI, no. 8301 (1740), p. 320; and vol. XXI, no. 15,556 (1782), p. 713.
- ¹³ For a compelling analysis of this complex process, see David Kuchta, *Modern Masculinity and the Three Piece Suit* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001). An analysis of how men in England actually shopped and learned of changes in fashion in the second half of the nineteenth century, see Christopher Breward, *The Hidden Consumer: Masculinity, Fashion and City Life, 1860-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999).
- ¹⁴ *Sanktpeterburg po perepisi 10 dekabria 1869 goda*, vol. 3 (St. Petersburg: Tipografiia Maikova, 1875), 8-10 and 42-5. These numbers almost certainly underestimated the number of seamstresses since many of these artisans wanted to avoid detection by the authorities. Many artisans did not register their occupation in the hope of evading tax obligations.
- ¹⁵ Joseph Bradley, *Muzhik and Muscovite: Urbanization in Late Imperial Russia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 365.
- ¹⁶ For an understanding of this process in France, see Clare Crowston, *Fabricating Women: The Seamstresses of Old Regime France, 1675-1791* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 11; and Judith G. Coffin, *The Politics of Women's Work: The Paris Garment Trades, 1750-1915* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).
- ¹⁷ For the role of artisans, including tailors, in the worker's movement, see Victoria E. Bonnell, *Roots of Rebellion: Workers' Politics and Organizations in St. Petersburg and Moscow, 1900-1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).
- ¹⁸ For more on the creation of the fashion press, see Margaret Beetham, *A Magazine of Her Own?: Domesticity and Desire in the Woman's Magazine* (New York: Routledge, 1996); and Vyvyan Holland, *Handcoloured Fashion Plates, 1770-1899* (London: Batsford, 1988).
- ¹⁹ For more on this, see Christine Ruane, "The Development of a Fashion Press in Russia: *Moda: Zhurnal dlia svetskikh liudei*," *An Improper Profession: Women, Gen-*

der, and *Journalism in Late Imperial Russia*, eds. Barbara T. Norton and Jehanne M. Gheith (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001): 74-93.

²⁰ RGIA, f. 777, op. 2, d. 28, ll. 58-ob.

²¹ For more on the women's press in the 1880s in Russia, see Carolyn R. Marks, "Provid[ing] Amusement for the Ladies: The Rise of the Russian Women's Magazine in the 1880s," *An Improper Profession: Women, Gender and Journalism in Late Imperial Russia*, eds. Barbara T. Norton and Jehanne M. Gheith (Durham: Duke Uni-

versity Press, 2001): 93-119.

²² RGIA, f. 777, op. 4, d. 138, l. 4.

²³ Jeffrey Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read: Literacy and Popular Culture, 1861-1917* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 113.

²⁴ For a history of the mass-circulation press in Russia, see Louise McReynolds, *The News Under Russia's Old Regime: The Development of a Mass-Circulation Press* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

Кристин Руэн

Женщины и рынок в имперской России, 1700-1917 гг.

Статья американского историка Кристин Руэн посвящена развитию капиталистического рынка в России в период с 1700 по 1917 год. Г-жа Руэн подвергает сомнению устоявшуюся схему создания капиталистического рынка, в которой роль производителя товаров принадлежала мужчине, женщине же отводилась роль простого потребителя. Анализируя историю индустрии моды в России описываемого периода, она отмечает роль и участие женщин в производстве одежды. Так, г-жа Руэн говорит о том, как после включения Екатериной Великой в 1764 году шитья, в качестве обязательного предмета обучения для женщин, текстильная индустрия начинает "феминизироваться", женщины становятся основными работниками в производстве готовой одежды. В то же время, женщины выступают и в качестве собственниц мастерских по эксклюзивному пошиву одежды. Развитие моды побуждает к открытию журналов мод, где образованные женщины получают возможность применить свои знания. Женщины являются как авторами статей или переводчиками французских и немецких изданий, так и владелицами таких журналов. Журналы развиваются, и колонки, посвященные моде, начинают появляться даже в изданиях самой разной тематики. Это показывает значимость и роль женского потребителя в создании капиталистического рынка в России.

В качестве выводов, г-жа Руэн отмечает участие российского правительства, которое подобно другим европейским правительствам, играло важную роль поддерживая российскую индустрию моды. Оно создало низкие тарифы для внутреннего производителя, оно вставило шитье в список обязательных для женщин предметов, что сделало женщин потенциальными работниками в производстве одежды. Также автор подчеркивает значимость роли женщин в развитии капитализма в России, гораздо большую, чем это представлялось ранее.

