

# CULTURES IN FLUX



LOWER-CLASS VALUES, PRACTICES, AND  
RESISTANCE IN LATE IMPERIAL RUSSIA

Edited by  
Stephen P. Frank and Mark D. Steinberg

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AND RESISTANCE  
IN LATE IMPERIAL RUSSIA

*Edited by Stephen P. Frank and  
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**M**ANY PEOPLE have contributed to the making of this book. The authors deserve greatest thanks for their thoughtful participation and their patience. They prove that intellectual individuality and scholarly community can indeed coexist.

Many others were also involved in this collaboration. The volume was conceived as a way to encourage more critical discussion and debate about lower-class cultures in Russia as well as to reflect work in this newly emerging field, most of which was still unpublished. We invited a number of people to propose essays that would reflect their research as well as grapple with problems of interpretation and theory. Most of the papers were first presented at several panels on popular culture at the 1990 and 1991 annual meetings of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies. Discussions continued among the contributors and editors as papers were revised. To facilitate revisions and help the editors select which works to include, each paper was critically reviewed by at least two other participants and an outside reader. All of these presentations, discussions, and evaluations have enhanced this collection—and, we hope, contributed to the development of informed and critical perspectives on the history of Russian popular culture generally.

We would like to express our appreciation and thanks to the many scholars who were involved in these discussions, in addition to those whose articles appear in this volume: Chris Chulos, Eugene Clay, Catherine Clay, Gregory Freeze, Abbott Gleason, Louise McReynolds, Roberta Manning, Brenda Meehan-Waters, Priscilla Roosevelt, Richard Stites, and William Mills Todd III. We are also grateful for the evaluations by the reviewers chosen by Princeton University Press. At the Press itself, Lauren Osborne did much to encourage and support the project. Nancy Tropic edited the manuscript with impressive care, thoughtfulness, and skill. Finally, the editors wish publicly to thank one another for their collegiality, friendship, tolerance, and good humor.



## **CULTURES IN FLUX**



## INTRODUCTION

*Mark D. Steinberg and Stephen P. Frank*

**P**ARADOXICALLY, as our knowledge of postemancipation Russian society and culture has grown, we have produced a historical portrait that is increasingly rough, fractured, and blurred. The co-existence of the traditional and the new, of inertia and vibrancy, is increasingly familiar to students of late imperial Russia—and, indeed, of Soviet Russia as well. But these simple dichotomies only begin to convey the complex dynamism and fluidity of Russian society and culture as social relationships, values, and structures were battered and reconstructed. Russia's emerging public sphere—the civic space that, for many contemporaries and historians, constitutes the essential foundation for a democratic society—was a terrain in flux.

Our use of the seemingly archaic term *lower-class* in the title of this collection is meant to reflect this tenuous relativity and ambiguity of social boundaries and, thus, the inadequacy of simple and rigid categories such as *peasants* or *workers* to express the variety of situations, mentalities, and even identities among the urban and rural poor. Economic and demographic changes during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries chipped away at an archaic, though still functional, paradigm of social estates. Social divisions deepened, but boundaries were also violated and renegotiated, and new actors appeared on the civic stage, often bearing new political and social claims. From Russia's rapidly growing and dynamic urban sector, for example, the emergence of professional and middle classes during the decades that followed the great reforms helped to reshape (and confuse) established identities as well as the country's social, intellectual, and cultural landscapes. The search for work and a better life saw thousands of peasant villagers journey to urban industrial centers and factory towns, swelling the ranks of the working class and creating a significant number of "worldly" peasants who served as cultural mediators between city and countryside while also increasing tensions and generational conflicts in their rural communities. Within the emerging proletariat, urbanized and literate workers grew steadily more conscious of their new working-class identity, but also increasingly distinct from the "dark masses," as they saw them, of workers and peasants. Groups as diverse as avant-garde artists and worker-intellectuals were among those standing astride both old and new class borders, at once alienated from

their social milieux and claiming an influential voice. Meanwhile, philanthropic concerns among the educated elite led to diverse efforts to improve the condition of the lower classes, ranging from universal primary education to the dissemination of popular science, from soup kitchens to public-hygiene campaigns, from social insurance to rural cooperatives—all of which contributed to a greater mingling of classes and cultures. The aging autocracy contributed much to the unevenness of this development: with the one hand it encouraged economic modernization, while with the other it fought to maintain social order and guard its monopoly on power.

Cultural change was inseparably intertwined with this economic and social metamorphosis. Cultural boundaries blurred and were redefined as economic and social change stimulated a new dynamism in Russia's widening cultural arena. Consumer production and consumption, for instance, encouraged a transformation of material culture that altered the face of daily life and thought for many Russians. Changes in fashion, home decorating, diet, and tastes occurred not only among the gentry and urban middle classes but also in working-class communities and rural hamlets. Electricity and trams—to take but two late-nineteenth-century symbols of modernity and progress—spread to distant provincial capitals, creating at least a superficial presence of urban “civilization” outside Russia's major cities. Railroads (and even bicycles) moved former serfs, workers, and members of the educated elite around the country at distances and speeds unimaginable only a few decades earlier, inspiring new notions of time and space.

The rapid expansion of literacy among the lower classes (particularly from the 1890s) combined with a striking growth of print media to bring a wide range of impressions to lower-class readers. In cities and industrial towns, reading had become an integral part of working-class culture by the turn of the century. Rural areas, too, saw public reading rooms and free libraries open in large numbers starting in the late 1880s, initiated either by peasants themselves or by officials, clergy, or educated reformers. Advances in medicine and science were disseminated among the country's “dark masses” through various media—although propagandists of progress found their work difficult because, they complained, these new ideas frequently clashed with existing popular customs and worldviews.

Turn-of-the-century innovations in entertainment, such as popular theater, cabarets, magic-lantern shows, cinema, fêtes, People's Houses, workers' clubs, and tearooms, sprang up alongside more traditional forms of sociability and festivity (including the older tavern and pub, local festivals, and church processions) and played an important role in stretching the boundaries and repertoire of popular culture. Workers,

peasants, and other groups navigated and appropriated these new media and arenas in a process that simultaneously served to reinforce and reinvent the culture of Russia's lower classes. As did midcentury western Europe and North America, late imperial Russia witnessed a transformation of the very concept of leisure, which became the subject of widespread public, clerical, and official debate between the 1880s and 1917. Classes, genders, generations, and cultures continually mingled—and sometimes collided—in a dynamic cultural space that the phrase *popular culture* only weakly represents.

Although recent scholarship on late imperial Russia has analyzed important aspects of this changing society (see the bibliography at the end of this volume), much remains unexamined or still superficially understood. Least of all do we understand how these processes functioned and acquired meaning at the lowest levels of society, in the minds and lives of individual peasants, workers, and others. Despite the virtual obsession of Russia's educated elite with culture, including popular culture, historians have only begun to explore the cultural context within which lower-class Russians experienced, interpreted, appropriated, and sometimes resisted change, and the complex intertwining of culture, class, economics, and politics.

This collection of essays examines the dynamic cultural world of Russia's lower classes during the last decades of the prerevolutionary order. The authors recall neglected or forgotten stories about popular life and culture. They recount diverse tales of peasant death rites and religious beliefs, family relationships and brutalities, defiant women in confrontations with social and political authorities, determined efforts by educated outsiders to control and transform popular festivities, folk songs and their creators, scenes from urban amusement parks, expressions of popular patriotism, scandals and dramas of everyday life as reported in the penny press, the creative encounters of worker-writers with notions of the self and the individual, and the insolent outrages of street hooligans.

Beyond this narrative and reconstructive purpose, the authors of these essays raise issues of methodology and interpretation, echoing and sometimes influenced by studies of the cultures and societies of other countries and times (see the bibliography). The differences among the authors in approach, emphasis, and argument will be clear. Influenced by different intellectual traditions and innovations, examining different evidence, and inclined to different interpretations of the dynamics of Russian history, they do not present a uniform answer to questions about the character and direction of the changes in Russian society and culture before the revolution. Indeed, one of the purposes of this collection is to provoke new and more critical questions. Still, as we emphasize in this introduction, these essays taken together suggest patterns and trends in the devel-



opment of lower-class lives and mentalities that go well beyond the particular subjects discussed. There is also, it may be said, a unity in the diversity of evidence and argument presented, which reflects not only interpretive differences but also different facets of a popular culture that was itself richly varied and contradictory.

The interrelationship between popular culture and material conditions, social relations, and the exercise of power is an important theme in virtually all of the essays in this collection. These studies treat Russian popular culture not as a static, uniform, and separate world, but as the varied expressive practices of groups of people as they interacted with the material, social, and cultural worlds around them. As the peasants in chapter 1 viewed the apparent boundary between life and death to be porous, the authors view the culture of Russia's lower classes as inseparable from the whole of Russian life.

As studies from other societies similarly attest, lower-class culture often reflected images and experiences from that larger world. The popular penny press, discussed here by Daniel Brower, dwelled on the ordinary hardships of life among its less powerful and less moneyed readers. Popular prints, music, and even circuses during World War I, Hubertus Jahn shows, integrated entertainment with evaluations of national and international affairs. "Folk songs"—a genre that also reminds us of the blurred boundary between urban and rural cultures—were extremely sensitive in both form and content to changes in the daily lives of their singers, as Robert Rothstein demonstrates. Indeed, music provided an exceptionally useful medium for both peasants and workers, who, in their capacity as makers of culture, composed original songs that addressed a broad range of social and economic issues as well as national politics. Even those peasant rituals viewed by outsiders as "customary" or "traditional" spoke of social conditions, relationships, and ongoing changes. Christine Worobec argues that encounters with epidemics, storms, droughts, and other phenomena of the natural world shaped Russian and Ukrainian death rituals in conjunction with Christian rites, while Boris Mironov notes the influence of agrarian economic and social relationships on peasant institutions and mentalities that stood as powerful cultural barriers against the threat of fundamental change brought by capitalism and social reform. This evidence of the social rootedness of culture does not, however, necessarily demonstrate simple material or social determination. The structured conditions of everyday life and the judgments and beliefs that made these experiences meaningful in people's own minds are more often understood here as each giving shape to one another, as part of the common fabric of human experience, knowledge, and action.

Just as the idea of culture cannot be detached from the whole of people's lives, neither can the idea of "popular" culture be abstracted from the culture of the rest of society. In facing death, Worobec argues, peasants interpreted the natural world with the help of Christian and other ideas that mingled far more harmoniously than traditional (and still dominant) views of the peasantry's "dual faith" would have us believe. Folk songs, as Rothstein describes, incorporated new ideas about the individual and about personal relationships, new stories from the popular press, and new melodies and motifs from the repertoire of professional song. Workers who took up the pen to voice publicly their views of themselves and of the world around them, as seen in Mark Steinberg's essay, similarly drew upon and reworked ideas and images from the commercial and radical press, the intelligentsia's social criticism, and both popular and high literature, as well as from everyday experience. In the public amusement parks (*uveselitel'nye sady*) of St. Petersburg, described here by Al'bin Konechnyi, scenes from operas and ballets were no less popular than folk dances and Gypsy songs for an audience in which industrial workers rubbed shoulders with shopkeepers. Classes and genres similarly intermixed in the penny press and in popular theaters, where an emerging "mass culture"—promoted by market-sensitive entrepreneurs—embraced factory workers, migrant laborers, peasants, petty merchants, salesclerks, and even the illiterate.

Perhaps the most striking indication of the blurred boundaries defining the popular—and of the sheer diversity of lower-class cultures—was the harassment of respectable pedestrians on city streets by hooligans, as discussed by Joan Neuberger. These petty outrages and crass behavior were not simple reflections of the life of the poor. Setting hooligan behavior beside the equally outrageous creations and public performances by futurist writers and artists, Neuberger encourages us to reconsider our understanding of both hooliganism and futurism. At issue is not only their influence on each other, but a deep and widespread revulsion before bourgeois propriety, order, and values. Here, as in the other essays, culture appears most often as an arena of conflict in which a broad range of forces found expression: social hostilities, lower-class demands for respect, transformative visions, and, as Stephen Frank and Neuberger both stress, bourgeois fears of a breakdown of moral authority, social discipline, deference, and public order.

Several of these essays challenge the long-standing paradigm within Russian historical studies that posits a rigid dichotomy of tradition versus change. The engagement between lower-class culture and the surrounding world cannot be adequately described as a simple confrontation between the traditional and the innovative or modern. Established cultural

forms often proved remarkably flexible and adaptable in the face of new circumstances and ideas or able to absorb new elements without being fundamentally transformed. By the same token, new experiences, expressions, and ideas were reworked against a body of older practices and thought. A new respect for the individual, for example, was increasingly evident among lower-class Russians, though, as Steinberg suggests, this idea was subjected to distinctive readings as workers refracted it through their particular social experiences and needs. Similarly, the “rational” recreations and invented traditions that middle- and upper-class moral reformers introduced, as Frank describes, to replace the perceived disorder of popular entertainment were themselves often appropriated and transformed by the very groups whose behavior they had been designed to alter. Villagers and urban dwellers alike maintained and reordered “traditional” practices and embraced and reworked new ones by rationally evaluating their utility—defining usefulness according to expectations, values, and desires, in response to pressures from within and outside their communities, and in accord with their understanding of the nature of the world around them.

Conventional assumptions about the separation of cultural creation and consumption are also treated critically in most of these essays. Brower, Jahn, and Konechnyi each show in different ways that we cannot understand culture produced “for” the people in isolation from its “implied” audience. Market-sensitive writers, editors, and cultural entrepreneurs shaped messages and forms not at will but as they imagined would best attract and retain a mass following. Popular artistic creativity—folk songs, stories, poetry, criticism—also had an intended audience in mind. Cultural production and consumption were parts of a common process in which both reader and author participated in shaping cultural forms and expressions.

Popular culture, like popular social life, was far from unified and harmonious, but reflected the fractures, estrangements, and conflicts within the lower classes. Indeed, though the cultural expressions described in these pages were most often collective practices and served ostensibly to strengthen and defend popular communities, they could not avoid reflecting the divisions within these aspiring or even well-established communities. In village rites and festivities we see divisions between generations, men and women, the strong and the weak, the rich and the poor, and the individual and the community, as well as between neighboring communities. The rural “cult of collectivity” itself, Mironov argues provocatively, disguised and promoted authoritarian domination of the old over the young, parents over children, men over women. Similarly, workers who fervently advocated class solidarity and struggle often felt deeply distant from the majority of workers, whom they ceaselessly berated for their

appalling ignorance, drunkenness, and passivity. And in the countryside after 1905, peasants carried out violent assaults upon villagers who withdrew from the communes to live on independent farmsteads, while these "separators" sought out new and distinct identities. At the same time, fractures within social groups provided important sources of creativity and leadership. The separate roles of women in village life and the special license often accorded unruly women, in Russia as elsewhere, facilitated village solidarity and collective action. Similarly, culturally marginal workers out of step with the common laborer played an essential role in organizing workers, introducing them to subversive new ideas, and even promoting among them notions of class identity.

These studies also describe popular protest and defiance, especially practices not limited to moments of open rebellion. Resistance and challenge to subordination, powerlessness, and oppression appeared in folk songs and funeral laments; in the popularity of penny-press tales about abusive employers, greedy merchants, negligent landlords, rude salesclerks, and cruel husbands; in the transgressions by worker-poets onto the stylistic terrain of high culture and in the uses to which received ideas were put; in the stubborn "vulgarity" of the poor; and in the more calculated humiliations hooligans wreaked on respectable citizens in both town and country.

Critical voices such as these were not simply manifestations of social rebellion translated into the language of culture, however. Cultural conformity and the sharing of values across class lines stood beside dissent and resistance. Among the urban poor, as Brower and Steinberg describe, notions of fairness, human dignity, and respect for the individual nurtured feelings of moral outrage against oppression but were also part of a civic moral discourse that transcended class division. During the war, Jahn shows, many patriotic motifs were understood and appreciated by socially diverse audiences, although lower-class audiences were far more likely to jeer the kaiser than cheer the tsar—popular patriotism existed, but it was distinctive, adaptive, and relatively fragile. The same may be said of gender as of class. As Barbara Engel argues, even when village women momentarily stepped beyond their culturally imposed passivity and submissiveness amidst open rebellion, they acted mainly as wives and mothers to defend traditional structures of family and community. As in many societies, subordinate groups often sought simultaneously to be included in a larger polity and social community and to assert their own separate interests and collective power. Social resistance was as ambiguous as it was pervasive.

Subordinate classes were also often implicated in their own domination, for the exercise of oppressive power was not limited to the ruling classes. The hooligan's uncultured behavior, after all, offended not only

the bourgeoisie. “Respectable” peasants, until well into the Soviet period, punished village hooligans by violent mob justice, or *samosud*. Peasants maintained strict codes of morality and conformity by humiliating, beating, or banishing errant individuals. An oppressive patriarchy reigned within peasant families—indeed, throughout much of lower-class social life—while village elders and officials struggled to maintain control over a younger generation corrupted by urban ways. Similarly, “cultured” and “conscious” workers not only criticized the heavy drinking, slovenly habits, and common cultural tastes of the majority of workers, but sought to impose on them their own standards of cultivation, morality, and, eventually, political radicalism—goals that, apart from the politics, were strikingly similar to those propounded in temperance societies controlled by the Orthodox church or by middle-class moral reformers. In the view of Mironov—who is thinking also of Soviet times—much of Russia’s traditional culture was stifling and oppressive, especially toward the individual.

These essays describe a variety of popular cultural expressions, suggest patterns, challenge certain established paradigms, and consider methods for study. But they do not propose a finished portrait. The collection offers an admittedly motley picture, plentifully decorated with overlapping categories and ambiguous meanings as well as conflicting interpretations. This seems appropriate, after all, since our knowledge and understanding of lower-class culture in imperial Russia is still fragmentary. But it may also be that this picture of variety, disorder, and ambiguity is the most plausible representation of a vital and changing culture.

# DEATH RITUAL AMONG RUSSIAN AND UKRAINIAN PEASANTS: LINKAGES BETWEEN THE LIVING AND THE DEAD

*Christine D. Worobec*

IN THE PREINDUSTRIAL and early industrial worlds, people had to confront death frequently. The average life expectancy was much lower than it is today in developed countries, and sudden death, brought on by epidemics or famine, was a regular phenomenon. Individuals had to deal with the loss of not only the elderly, but also wives, husbands, sisters, brothers, and other adults in the prime of life—as well as children, many of whom died before the age of ten.<sup>1</sup>

Religious beliefs and the enactment of elaborate death rituals that provided linkages between the living and the dead helped the bereaved cope with the continual loss of relatives, helpmates, and actual or potential laborers for the family economy. Belief and ritual also provided the hope and strength to continue with life's struggles: "It is religion, with its attendant beliefs and practices, which legitimates death and enables the individual 'to go on living in society after the death of significant others and to anticipate his own death with, at the very least, terror sufficiently miti-

An earlier version of this essay was presented at the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies in Washington, D.C., in October 1990. The comments of J. Eugene Clay, Chris Chulos, Barbara Evans Clements, Stephen Frank, and Gregory Freeze were invaluable in helping me make substantial revisions, as was a National Endowment for the Humanities 1992 Summer Stipend, which permitted me to do research in Helsinki.

<sup>1</sup> The mortality rate in imperial Russia declined steadily, from 36.9 per thousand in 1861–70 to 34.2 per thousand in 1892–1900 and 31.0 per thousand in 1901–5. A. G. Rashin, *Naselenie Rossii za 100 let (1811–1913 gg.): Statisticheskie ocherki* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe statisticheskoe izdatel'stvo, 1956), 5. Nevertheless, these rates were extremely high and reflective of a premodern society. More than 25 percent of infants died within the first year of life; an additional 20 percent did not reach adulthood. See Peter Gatrell, *The Tsarist Economy, 1850–1917* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1986), 31–37; and V. O. Demich, "Pediatriia u russkago naroda," *Vestnik obshchestvennoi gigieny, sudebnoi i prakticheskoi meditsiny* 11, no. 2 (August 1891), pt. 2:128.

gated so as not to paralyze the continued performance of the routines of everyday life.’”<sup>2</sup> As conditions for life improved and life expectancy grew significantly, and as death became more remote from the experience of the living—today, people generally die in hospitals rather than at home, and morticians instead of relatives prepare the body for burial—many of the traditional death rituals disappeared, leaving only a shell of beliefs to help (often inadequately) the living cope with the loss of a loved one.

Death ritual is normally a subject of inquiry for anthropologists. Only recently have historians of European societies turned their attention to this intriguing subject, asking many of the questions that anthropologists have devised for their field studies and posing new ones that provide a historical framework for the study of societies.<sup>3</sup> Death rituals reveal a great deal about past societies, including their mores and worldviews, the power relationships between the elderly and the young as well as between men and women, the individual’s relationship to the community, and the interchange and tensions between clerical and popular or unlearned religion. The examination of death ritual among Russian and Ukrainian peasants in imperial Russia in the last decades of the nineteenth century attempts to elucidate these variables. These two peasant societies, despite variations among regions and even villages, shared a subsistence economy and common cultural patterns, particularly in the belief structure of the Orthodox religion.

The sources documenting death ritual among postemancipation Russian and Ukrainian peasants are largely from nineteenth-century ethnographers intent on preserving the lore of the traditional village, which they worried would disappear once urbanization and a cash economy captured the imagination of the peasantry. The sources are problematic in that they describe only practices that occurred outside the institutional church. They tend to be silent on Orthodox ritual and only mention in passing the priest’s role in the funeral and subsequent commemorative services. This lack of interest in the official ritual may be explained in part by the familiarity of the authors and their educated readers with Orthodox practices, which they felt did not need further comment, and in part by the authors’ disdain for the Orthodox church—a sentiment shared by a significant segment of educated Russian society. They considered the church unresponsive to the needs of society at large. For them, it had become a bulwark of the autocracy, beginning in the early eighteenth century with Peter the Great’s abolition of the Moscow Patriarchate and

<sup>2</sup> Loring M. Danforth and Alexander Tsiaras, *The Death Rituals of Rural Greece* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 31.

<sup>3</sup> The pioneering effort in this regard is Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, trans. Helen Weaver (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981).