

Material Culture in Russia and the USSR: Things, Values, Identities
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The Bolshevik revolutionary spirit was committed to totally re-making human life in the socialist utopia, as noted by several of the contributors to *Material Culture in Russia and the USSR: Things, Values, Identities*. This aim by definition necessitated the redesign and revamp of the material world, so that the new Soviet citizen, navigating this new environment, would both shape and be shaped by tangible manifestations of Soviet ideology. Many members of the general public, including readers of this journal, may be familiar with Russian avant-garde artists and architects, from Constructivists to Suprematists, Russian Futurists to zaum adherents. Around the 2017 centennial of the Russian revolutions, blockbuster art exhibitions around the world have focused on these famous artists and styles. This volume, although it originates from an interdisciplinary international conference held in 2013, nevertheless can be viewed as an academic corollary to that ongoing project of viewing the revolution and its legacies through its tangible traces—in this case, through broadly defined ‘material culture’.

In this ambitious and wide-ranging volume, an array of scholars from across the United States and Europe seek to define and designate Russian and Soviet material culture, as well as changes and continuities in this culture’s meanings, values, socio-economic and socio-cultural roles and general (inter)relationships. One of the volume’s stated goals is to “examine Russian or Soviet material culture qua material culture” (page 4), instead of simple reflections or consequences of the momen-

tous change that swept over Russia and the Soviet Union in the last century. The contributions also purposefully expand the horizons of what might be considered ‘material culture’, as well as seeking to define and analyze material culture through decidedly non-material mediums.

The first section, ‘Material Culture and (De)classification’, examines the process of ‘classification’ reciprocally enacted by things and people: “the way in which possessions ‘classify’ their owners as belonging to one community, rather than another, and at the way in which those owners classify their possessions” (page 5). Sokolovskii’s chapter attempts to trace the material legacies of Tsar Peter the Great’s turn-of-the-eighteenth-century ‘modernizing’ reforms by looking at changes in the number and placement of windows in Russian peasant dwellings. Few of these buildings remain intact, and fewer still were recorded at the time, so the project relies on computer-aided reconstruction, as well as photographic survey of remaining peasant houses across Russia. The following chapter by Koustova also analyzes photographs, but here these are a point of entry to the experiences of Soviet citizens forcibly deported during Stalinist campaigns of repression (1927–1953, although this work focuses on people deported post-1940). Through looking at photographs over time and using them to prompt memories during interviews with former deportees, Koustova reveals the importance that objects, both lost to dispossession and gained or made during life in exile, had and continue to have in shaping the informants’ sense of individual and collective identity. Focusing instead on the 1970s–1980s, Alekseyeva analyzes the advice given to Soviet women in academic and general publications about the problem of *byt*, or the habits and material trappings of daily life. Changing ideas about the level of state involvement in the ‘domestic’ or ‘private’ sphere, along with shifting ideals of how an exemplary Soviet household should reflect and shape its occupants’ behavior, led to a somewhat confused situation over ‘correct’ taste, decoration and behaviour. Finally, Boitsova examines the placement of photographs inside contemporary Russian urban and rural domestic interiors to see how similar attitudes about the role of the home changed and shaped behaviour over time. In particular, Boitsova finds that the traditional Russian Orthodox ‘red corner’, where icons were traditionally placed, has survived (especially in rural homes)

as a site for placing treasured photographs of people, particularly deceased family. Like the section's first paper on window placement, this is a fascinating example of how material culture studies can shed light onto changing attitudes towards traditions that might have been officially ignored as deviant (in the case of religion) or simply beneath notice.

The second section, 'Consuming Ideology', focuses on different manifestations of Soviet and Russian ideologies within various types of material culture. In the first chapter, West examines a range of advertising materials for Shustov cognac from 1910–1912, paying close attention to how the writers parodied and mimicked a wide range of existing Russian literary and cultural tropes in order to sell their product. In pushing their cognac as the cure to all sorts of economic, socio-cultural and existential ills, the advertisements survive as a testament to "a bleak world, yet, as refracted through the Shustov shot glass, it is also funny, frivolous, and resilient" (page 115). Hilton's piece immediately follows with a broad overview of the development of Soviet advertisements from 1923–1925, necessary even in an officially anti-capitalist state in order to promote and stabilize fledgling Soviet industry and economy. Famous artists, including Vladimir Mayakovsky and Aleksandr Rodchenko, worked on these early advertisements, and the ambiguity they felt towards this project's mix of economic and political motivations is palpable in their work.

Although the official 'party line' on consumerism changed dramatically with Stalin's rise to power in the mid-1920s, as Randall demonstrates in her succeeding chapter, the perceived responsibility of women to ensure that household purchasing habits were politically correct did not abate in the leadup to World War Two. Further, major economic and political differences notwithstanding, women were seen to hold that same key political and economic role in contemporary Germany, China and the United States. This piece importantly takes the Soviet context out of its 'communist' vacuum and allows for a broader analysis of the 'citizen-consumer' in its different global manifestations. The next chapter, by Chernyshova, is a study of the changing ideological and socio-economic meanings of blue jeans in the mid-to-late Soviet Union, as well as nostalgia for those meanings in contemporary Russia. In a crystallization of the wildly shifting meanings that the same object can reflect and transmit over time, these

jeans, “the once-symbol of the capitalist West, have become a powerful symbol of the Soviet past, and especially of ‘developed socialism’” (page 167). Rounding out this section, Zhuk presents an analysis of the high-stakes socio-cultural and political capital associated with disco music and videotapes, focusing on how their procurement and circulation networks entangled Komsomol (youth Communist Party) leaders and black market traders in the 1970s–1980s. The connections forged over these coveted tapes, Zhuk argues, were later parlayed into the post-Soviet wealth networks that dominated eastern Ukrainian and national politics until the Revolution of Dignity in 2013–2014. Like the work just before it, this underlines the inherent malleability underlying even the most seemingly iconic meanings assigned to and communicated by specific objects.

‘Imagining Material Culture’, the third section, views material culture as it is portrayed in two very different media. Mazur and Gorbachev undertake an analysis of the types, frequency of portrayal and meaning ascribed to various forms of objects in films set in rural Russia of the mid-to-late Soviet era. Whether the films lean towards the idealistic or realistic, they tend to portray items associated with the spread of modernity to the countryside, such as electric lights and radios, in a positive light, while appliances such as washing machines and refrigerators, which saw limited uptake as well as infrastructural difficulties, have more nuanced roles. Moving to the literary, Gigante examines images of things in writer Lyudmila Ulitskaya’s work, again emphasizing how literature can capture details of the material world that escape the notice of contemporary official records. In the afterword, Lemon writes a thoughtful personal essay examining the hegemonic idea that Soviet material culture was inherently inferior to its Western counterparts. She concludes, “it is most likely that, by building out from trying to understand specific conflicts around and relations to things[...]to broader forces and connections, by looping the material turn to include people, we can craft accounts that skirt and defy the lingering ideological commitments to purified difference that have filtered our visions” (page 246).

The strongest criticism I have of this volume is its brevity. Although Hilton’s and Randall’s chapters are truly fascinating, the attempt to fully analyze in fewer than twenty pages, respectively, subjects like the birth of Soviet advertising and a comparative study of the ‘citizen-consumer’

across four different societies, left me wishing that the authors had more space to fully realize their claims. One of the volume's most salient overarching (and interdisciplinary) points is the extreme changeability of the meanings attached to and embodied by material culture, as Chernyshova and Gigante succinctly illustrate. Although not an archaeological volume, *per se*, these works also illustrate a maxim of archaeology—its role as a democratizing force in the past, bringing to light forgotten or ignored lifeways—and transports it into the recent past and present through a variety of methodologies and theories. Finally, it rightly challenges the reader to question received wisdom about the meanings and values of specific objects, as well as entire material cultures.