

*Commerce in Russian Urban Culture, 1861–1914. Edited by William Craft Brumfield, Boris V. Anan'ich, and Yuri A. Petrov.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001. xvi + 239 pp. Index, notes, illustration, photographs. Cloth, \$49.50. ISBN 0–801-86750–9.

Reviewed by William Tompson

Traditional accounts of Russian history have long emphasized the weakness and inadequacies of Imperial Russia's commercial bourgeoisie. While it would be difficult to reject this view, the traditional image of a "weak bourgeoisie" is all too often overdone. *Commerce in Russian Urban Culture, 1861–1914* attempts to redress the balance somewhat, albeit with reference to urban culture rather than politics. The product of a 1996 conference held at the Kennan Institute in Moscow, this edited collection provides strong evidence of the dynamism of Russia's urban commercial classes during the period between the Emancipation and the onset of the Great War.

The book is divided into two parts corresponding to two broad themes: the first examines Russia's commercial milieu as a social and cultural phenomenon, while the second looks at the impact of business in late Imperial Russia on the formation of its cities—a particularly important theme given that the brief flowering of tsarist Russia's urban bourgeoisie coincided with very rapid growth in the empire's cities. Russian urban spaces to this day bear the imprint of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie to an extent that few modern visitors to Russian cities fully appreciate. Anyone who has wandered along the arcades of GUM or through the Petrovskii Passazh in central Moscow has, knowingly or not, encountered this legacy directly.

Part I comprises seven chapters devoted to such issues as banking in St. Petersburg and Moscow, the use of funded loans in the development of urban infrastructure (yet another way in which the bourgeoisie of the nineteenth century helped shape the urban environment of the twentieth), the charitable activities of banks in Moscow and of entrepreneurs in Nizhni Novgorod, and the relation between the Old Belief and entrepreneurial culture. James L. West's chapter on the Old Belief and entrepreneurship is a particular gem. Drawing on the work of scholars ranging from John Scott to Iuri Lotman and Jürgen Habermas, West manages to provide a fresh perspective

on a theme that has been treated by numerous scholars, drawing a persuasive link between the experience of dissent and entrepreneurial culture without falling into crude simplifications.

Also intriguing is the implicit contrast that emerges between the St. Petersburg banks—as described in the chapters in Part I by Boris V. Anan'ich and Sergei G. Beliaev and by Sergei K. Lebedev—and their Moscow rivals, described by Yuri A. Petrov. Many of the issues discussed in these chapters, moreover, are eerily familiar to observers of contemporary Russian banking: the problem of poor creditor protection, debates about the links between banks and industrial companies, and polemics about the allegedly “speculative” character of some banks’ securities investments, to name but three. The reader emerges with a clear sense that Moscow and St. Petersburg banks essentially represented different models of capitalism. Lebedev’s description of the ways in which the St. Petersburg banks facilitated the introduction of Western practices into Russian commercial life, often with the backing of the state, is also valuable and full of resonance for observers of post-Soviet Russia.

Part II considers the impact of commerce on the urban environment. Chapters by Boris M. Kirikov, Natalia Datieva, William Brumfield, and Patricia Herlihy consider the architecture of banks, retail space, and other commercial enterprises in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Odessa, and Nizhni Novgorod. To these might be added Beliaev’s chapter (actually located in Part I) on funded loans and the development of municipal infrastructure in St. Petersburg, an issue that in some ways fits better in the context of subjects discussed in Part II. It is difficult to identify any single clear line of argument uniting all these chapters, but each examines a similar set of themes pertaining to the mix of native and foreign influences that shaped aesthetic judgments and to the interaction between aesthetic and technical–commercial considerations that influenced the development of a commercial architecture. Finally, Part II ends with a chapter by Blair A. Ruble that is in essence a short version of his book, *Second Metropolis: Pragmatic Pluralism in Gilded Age Chicago, Silver Age Moscow, and Meiji Osaka* (2001). While it sits a little oddly alongside the other contributions, this chapter is one of the book’s highlights. Ruble argues persuasively that, for all their obvious differences, his three chosen cities served, during a period of rapid and often painful transition to modernity, as

cradles for a distinctive form of urban politics, which he labels “pragmatic pluralism.” He finds that the social fragmentation and instability experienced by these cities as they made this transition actually facilitated the emergence of a pluralist, democratic politics.

Much of the book is, it must be said, rather hard going for the reader—harder perhaps than it needs to be. While the research is consistently solid and the perspectives illuminating, too many chapters tend to be excessively narrative or descriptive, showing little attempt to incorporate the material into a clear overall structure of argument. As a result, the chapters read at times like catalogs, describing one institution/entrepreneur/building after another and establishing little connection between them. In some cases, the mere addition of subheadings within chapters would have given the reader a sense of where the chapter was going and why. The book would also have benefited from either a more elaborate introduction or a separate concluding chapter (perhaps two—one for each part of the volume). Many of the most interesting questions (such as the contrasts between the Moscow and Petersburg banks) arise when similar themes recur, but the editors have not highlighted or compared these common issues. Yet such weaknesses should not obscure the fact that *Commerce in Russian Urban Culture* greatly increases our understanding of pre-Revolutionary Russia’s cities and its urban entrepreneurs.

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