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**AMBIGUOUS IDENTITY:
THE QUESTION OF MIDDLE CLASS IN LATE IMPERIAL RUSSIA**

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In the first decades of the twentieth century, Russia struggled to present the world with a coherent image. The 1905 Revolution, a series of strikes and riots sparked when Tsar Nicholas II ordered his soldiers to fire on peaceful demonstrations, died down only when Nicholas reluctantly conceded to the creation of the Duma, the first parliamentary system the Russian empire had ever seen. As the autocracy begrudgingly accustomed itself to the existence of the Duma and a quasi form of constitutional autocracy, Russian political tendencies remained in a state of constant flux - each elected Duma would clash with the autocracy and find itself disbanded within a few short months. Terrorist attacks and massive labor strikes periodically unsettled matters even further, as did the outbreak of war across Europe in 1914. Simultaneously, Russian society wrestled with new ideas of identity and culture, only compounding the uncertainties of this volatile atmosphere. Central to these questions lay the emergence of a middle class that had steadily grown over the preceding decades, a segment of society considered above the peasants and industrial laborers, but still beneath the wealth and refinement of Russia's aristocratic elite.

In American and European understandings, the middle class has come to epitomize the modern era, as when Vanessa Schwartz alludes to the

modernization of Paris as designed by and for the Parisian bourgeoisie.¹ In Western regions, political processes and democratic ideals are said to rely on the middle class while simultaneously catering to its wants and needs - developments characterized by the birth of such trends as political liberalism and consumer culture. While room for debate certainly still exists within these frameworks, most accept such characterizations with little hesitation, often extrapolating to create a sort of universal middle class based upon them.

Meanwhile, scholars of Imperial Russia have debated the role and nature of their own middle class practically as long as it has existed, but have found seemingly little to agree upon except the uniqueness of the Russian experience of modernity.² In her analysis of suicides between the revolutions of 1905 and 1917, Susan Morrissey perceives increasing suicide rates among the educated population as a response to the failure of the 1905 Revolution and a modern middle class society increasingly defined by materialism.³ Sally West, however, claims that this same materialistic consumer culture served as a normative influence that guided the development of an increasingly diverse Russian society.⁴ Meanwhile Stephen Lovell focuses on a growing suburban estate culture as evidence of the impossibility of social cohesion within the middle class(es), dwelling on the ambiguously intermediate status to which this culture testified.⁵ For Roshanna Sylvester, as well as Samuel D. Kassow, James L. West, and Edith W. Clowes, this ambiguity becomes the focus of their discussions on crime and civil society respectively. Through their analysis, a vaguely three-tiered middle class emerges faintly from the surrounding haze – the lower-middle class *meshchanstvo*, the mainstream bourgeoisie, and the more intellectual ranks of the

¹ Vanessa Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-Siècle Paris*, (University of California Press, 1998), 3.

² Samuel D. Kassow, James L. West, and Edith W. Clowes, "The Problem of the Middle in Late Imperial Russian Society," in *Between Tsar and People: Educated Society and the Quest for Public Identity*, ed. Kassow, West, and Clowes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 3-14; Susan K. Morrissey, "Children of the Twentieth Century," in *Suicide and the Body Politic in Imperial Russia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 312-45; Roshanna P. Sylvester, *Tales of Old Odessa: Crime and Civility in a City of Thieves* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2005); Stephen Lovell, "Between Arcadia and Suburbia: Dachas in Late Imperial Russia," *Slavic Review* 61, no. 1 (2002): 66-87.

³ Morrissey, 321, 344-345.

⁴ Sally West, "The Material Promised Land: Advertising's Modern Agenda in Late Imperial Russia," *Russian Review* 57, no. 3 (1998): 345-63.

⁵ Lovell, 66-87.

intelligentsia – but even these groups find themselves marked by a measure of overlap between their members and a certain fluidity between their definitions. Delving deeper into the material and literary displays of the early twentieth century reveals cultural clashes and characteristics that simultaneously define and obscure the existence of a Russian middle class, handicapping its abilities to strongly influence the development of modern politics. Through these discussions, we see the ambiguous nature of Russian middle class society as its most consistent aspect, and perhaps the only truly defining factor thereof.

The Russian middle class began with the birth of the intelligentsia, a segment of educated Russians determined to distance themselves from the autocratic regime with which they vehemently disagreed. While this once uniquely Russian social category has subsequently spread worldwide, its long and active legacy in nineteenth-century Russia gives rise to its reputation as the oldest and highest tier of middling society. This group's cohesiveness stems not from an economic sense of class, but from a unified ideology grounded in education and progress.⁶ Previous efforts to shape the course of Russian development, from the Great Reforms in the 1860s to the Liberation Movement at the turn of the century, bolstered this identity and endowed the intelligentsia with a certain credibility of opinion.⁷ While not its most defining factor, Sylvester nonetheless demonstrates that economic status helped establish the intelligentsia as a role model for the rest of respectable middle class society, a standard to which others strove to live up to at least in appearance, if not in character.⁸ She illustrates this with the appeal of Odessa's Literary-Artistic Society, which, while designed for a strictly intelligentsia clientele, actually resonated more with the lower middling groups striving to attain a similar appearance of refinement and legitimacy.⁹ Moreover, the intelligentsia possessed an acute awareness of and sense of pride in this role, made apparent by their vocal rejections of anything they perceived as a corrupting influence. Hence their quickness to discard the overtly sexual themes of the novel, *Sanin*, as amoral and pornographic, a sign of cultural exploitation and an offensive departure from acceptable behavior and

⁶ Kassow, West, and Clowes, 4.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Sylvester, 9.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 11-12.

morality.¹⁰ Odessa's literary intelligentsia expressed similar views as they strove to implement social and cultural improvements through their publications. Sylvester presents the "civilizing mission" of Odessan journalists on numerous occasions, illustrating how authors presented developments in well-meaning calls for reforms, hoping to lift the dregs of urban society to civilized heights.¹¹

As strong as these reforming urges from the intelligentsia may seem, however, the strength and influence of the intelligentsia found itself under siege, particularly in the wake of the 1905 Revolution and its failure to bring about effective political changes. The post-revolutionary years found many willing to question the heart and soul of the intelligentsia, to reevaluate its legacy in light of twentieth century developments. *Landmarks*, a collection of essays published in 1909, sets about critiquing the intelligentsia and providing suggestions for a possible revival. Aleksandr Izgoev's essay dismisses the guiding influence of the intelligentsia by focusing on their "powerlessness" to mold their own families according to their beliefs or to create any sort of "ideological inheritance" that would provide them with a sense of continuity.¹² He holds the Russian student to be a sham, who "[studies] rather little and poorly," caught up in a culture of peer pressure and lack of content, from which he will emerge into the void that is intelligentsia life.¹³ Others testify to this period as a time of crisis for the intelligentsia, where it must either acknowledge its past mistakes and rectify them, or become the ruin of Russia.¹⁴ Nikolai Berdyaev, author and religious philosopher, accuses them of cliquishness and dogmatism, sequestering themselves from mainstream society and failing to engage in truly intellectual dialogue.¹⁵ While he acknowledges the crippling influence of the autocracy on the intelligentsia's development, he does not excuse them from culpability for

¹⁰Mikhail Artsybashev, Sanin, in *Entertaining Tsarist Russia* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998), 330. Laura Engelstein, "From Avant-Garde to Boulevard: Literary Sex," *The Keys to Happiness: Sex and the Search for Modernity in Fin-de-Siècle Russia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 383-388.

¹¹Sylvester, 30, 33-37, 90.

¹²Aleksandr Izgoev, "On Educated Youth: Notes on Its Life and Sentiments," in *Vekhi Landmarks*, trans. and ed. Marshall S. Shatz and Judith E. Zimmerman (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1994), 89.

¹³Izgoev, 97, 100.

¹⁴Sergei Bulgakov, "Heroism and Asceticism: Reflections on the Religious Nature of the Russian Intelligentsia," in *Vekhi Landmarks*, 25; Nikolai Berdyaev, "Philosophic Truth and the Moral Truth of the Intelligentsia," in *Landmarks*, 3.

¹⁵Berdyaev, 8-9.

their own actions.¹⁶ Together, these authors present an intelligentsia waning in influence - stagnant and in desperate need of ideological reinvigoration. For them, the intelligentsia might succeed in influencing Russia's modern political and cultural ways of life, but without updating their perspective, that influence must indubitably come in a negative form.

Of all the middling social groups, the bourgeoisie find themselves most often categorized as the heart and soul of the middle class, but this holds true more in Western Europe than in Russia at this period. For Russian society, this position developed less distinctly and much more tenuously. Some attribute the bourgeoisie with the advent of progress, prosperity, and consumption in Russia's urban atmosphere, along with all the "trappings of western bourgeois civilization" - banks, offices, museums, cafés, universities and more.¹⁷ Coupled with this constant search for novel ways to improve and enjoy the comforts of their urban existences lie increasing attempts to mold the lower echelons of society to reflect bourgeois values.¹⁸ Fierce and vocal protest against this process and way of life, however, became just as integral to its role in modern society. The trend of hooliganism as investigated by Joan Neuberger testifies to the presence of middle class-ness in modern Russia while simultaneously undermining its power and influence.

Literally "town dwellers," bourgeois families sprang up from Russia's traditional merchant estate into a distinctly urban tradition of bustling commercial activity and industrialization in the late nineteenth century. The relative newness of a cultured bourgeois led many to perceive its claims to respectability as utterly pretentious, founded upon borrowed and outdated intelligentsia literature and a putting on of airs that they viewed as laughably offensive.¹⁹ Through petty crimes and loud public displays, hooligans rebelled against these airs in an "outrageous" lack of public decorum.²⁰ Their crimes ranged from causing drunken ruckuses in intentionally public arenas to loosening the bolts of park

¹⁶ Ibid., 10.

¹⁷ Sylvester, 20.

¹⁸ West, 347.

¹⁹ "A Slap in the Face of Public Taste" (1912), in *Russian Futurism through Its Manifestoes*, 1912-1928, ed. Anna Lawton (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 51-52.

²⁰ Joan Neuberger, "Culture Besieged: Hooliganism and Futurism," in *Cultures in Flux: Lower-Class Values, Practices, and Resistance in Late Imperial Russia*, ed. Stephen P. Frank and Mark D. Steinberg (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 186-187.

benches in order to embarrass unsuspecting members of respectable (middle class) society and assaulting the taxi of a well-known Odessian police chief and his wife.²¹ The artistic players in these spontaneous forms of rebellion, the self-proclaimed futurists, outlined the intentions of these riotous actions in the title of one of their earliest publications, proclaiming a strong desire for their behavior to serve as a “Slap in the Face of Public Taste.”²² They went beyond a mere rejection of proper bourgeois appearances, commercialization, and moralistic literature to launch a full scale assault against the overbearing triviality they saw within these institutions.²³ Their willingness to tell bourgeois society to “Go to Hell!” worried recipients of these attacks by emphasizing the fragile construction of their position and their vulnerability to lower class vulgarity.²⁴ The involvement of middle class students in hooligan-style attacks only reiterated this vulnerability, and helped blur the lines between working-class and bourgeois culture to an even greater degree.²⁵ By challenging the bourgeoisie, the hooligans and futurists do inadvertently acknowledge its growing influence on urban cultural standards. Ultimately, however, the hooligans’ cultural attacks and public mockery of “bourgeois propriety” testify to a segment of society unable to rally the middle and lower classes to its causes or have a strong voice in the deciding of Russia’s future.²⁶

We tend to view the bourgeoisie as the essence of middle classness the way that it appears in much of Europe at this time. In Russia, however, a rapidly growing lower middle class challenged the idea of a bourgeois monopoly on public culture and civil society, lending its own distinct personality to the urban scene. The *meshchanstvo* - consisting predominately of those employed in “semi-professional and lower white collar positions” - took advantage of the rise in social mobility to enjoy some of the trappings of bourgeois and intelligentsia culture, yet still struggled to achieve the respectability that marked their wealthier, more refined counterparts.²⁷

²¹ Sylvester, 100-102. Neuberger, 189-191.

²² “Slap,” 51-52.

²³ Neuberger, 193.

²⁴ “Go to Hell” (1914), in *Russian Futurism through Its Manifestoes*, 1912-1928, 85-86.

²⁵ Sylvester, 103.

²⁶ Neuberger, 185.

²⁷ Sylvester, 12.

On the one hand, the *meshchanstvo* seems to form the backbone of the urban public to a much greater extent than the bourgeoisie, dictating many of the trends and behaviors of city life.²⁸ Popular entertainments and moral admonishments alike focused their attention on the pleasure and enlightenment of the *meshchanstvo* crowd, while the consumer identity portrayed in most advertising geared itself directly toward this same audience, selling the “well-being, culture, and comfort” to which it aspired.²⁹ This *meshchanskii* desire for such markers of refinement becomes most apparent in “The Little Family,” an Odessan satire of Jewish *meshchanstvo* culture published in 1912.³⁰ Rachel, the mother of the family, laments the state of her furniture as lacking in opulence, testifying to a general desire for material wealth as well as the idea that one’s possessions defined one’s place in society.³¹ Meanwhile the search for a wealthy, well-established husband for Mathilda, the oldest daughter, highlights the *meshchanstvo* appetite for upward mobility. Clearly, her parents hope to achieve bourgeois respectability for the entire family through their daughter’s marriage.³² This play’s publication to a lower middle class audience reveals the author’s desire to both censure and uplift the *meshchanstvo* by pointing out a few of the crass idiosyncrasies that prevent it from rising to a truly cultured status.³³ This trend of moralizing literature filled the periodicals of the day, but always alongside tales meant for sensationalized *meshchanstvo* entertainment.³⁴ By aiming as much to fulfill lower middle class demands as to shape what those demands look like, these works indicate a modern society heavily geared towards both *meshchanstvo* criticism and consumption.

The *meshchanstvo* struggle for both the material benefits and moral standing of middle class culture also served as a staging ground for many questions about the nature of Russian society and its future. Though now enjoying many of the privileges of education and culture, the lower rungs of middle class society and really the entirety of the middle classes, faced continuous challenges

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 128.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 106-128. West, 359.

³⁰ “Semeika’ili ‘Gospoda Odessity,” *Krokodil*, April 1912, no. 18, 19, and 20 in Sylvester, 129-153.

³¹ “Semeika’ili ‘Gospoda Odessity,” in Sylvester, 131-132.

³² This can also be seen in the son’s paths in business and the family’s despair over Esther’s emancipated behavior and associations.

³³ Sylvester, 130-131.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 126.

to the culture they sought to attain or preserve. Radical individualism often undermined social standards of behavior, both public and private, that the *meshchanstvo* at least idealized, if not actually followed.³⁵ This new creed of the individual typically arose in the shocking new literature of the period, which sparked outrage in all levels of middling society for its vivid, vulgar descriptions and amoral attitudes. Artsybashev's descriptions in *Sanin* of the seduction of Lida, with all her thrills and "tremors" and Sarudin's violent fantasies, embody these individualistic urges to live a life of pleasure and "spontaneous impulse."³⁶ Instead of advocating for the fulfillment of civic duties and social reforms, Artsybashev and his contemporaries touted a reckless embrace of natural impulse regardless of outcome.³⁷ Indeed, his vivid descriptions of carnal passion, even when only imagined by his characters rather than performed, bear a frightful correspondence to many of the sexually violent crimes publicized in Odessan journals and newspapers.³⁸ Instead of using these tales to warn, admonish, and reform, as Odessan journalists did, the authors of this literature glorified their characters' bold attacks on the middle class status-quo. They rejected middle class morality and ideas of responsibility, choosing to live for the self and its desires, however contrary to the norm they might be. Thus the *meshchanstvo* found itself and the bourgeois life it sought dismissed as stifling and aimless, hinting that not all might be well in the shining parlors of the bourgeois, and directly challenging all the things they strove to gain in their pursuit of wealth and a better way of life.

In the face of all this questioning – intellectual critique, hooliganism, and risqué literature – Russia's middle classes strove to present a united front toward their antagonists that they would never admit to amongst themselves. The intelligentsia, bourgeois, and *meshchanstvo* clashed constantly over the standards of culture and enlightenment to which they all laid claim.³⁹ Moreover these three layers of middle society were complicated by their similarities of appearance and the rapidity with which fortunes rose and fell in this volatile period. No guaranteed means to discern between the petty businessman, well-to-do banker,

³⁵ Engelstein, 359-420.

³⁶ Artsybashev, 331-332. Engelstein, 385.

³⁷ Note that *Sanin* eventually commits suicide and many other characters that Engelstein discusses do as well.

³⁸ Sylvester, 44-45, 62, 97-100.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 12, 15, 76, 102-103.

and scholarly intellectual existed in the bustling cities of modern Russia. While one might hazard a guess based on specific attributes or places frequented, one never possessed any certainty of with whom one dealt.⁴⁰ Combined with a reality of fortunes lost and fortunes gained practically overnight, one never knew if a resident of a lower end *meshchanstvo* neighborhood “belonged,” or if they might be a learned intellectual fallen on hard times. In light of this ambiguity, it becomes problematic to speak of a single middle class, or even of three distinct middle classes. Due to the blurring of social boundaries and widespread class conflicts, the middling classes found themselves ill-equipped to combat the challenges inherent to a modern Russian state and significantly less able to influence politics within an autocratic Russia struggling to translate its relevance to the modern world. While clearly shaped by Russia’s particular historical context, these developments perhaps complicate American and European understandings of middle class-ness, calling into question foundational assumptions concerning the nature and influence of the middle class within the modern world.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 10.

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