The Material Promised Land: Advertising’s Modern Agenda in Late Imperial Russia

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Given the widely reported and often scorned explosion of advertising in post-Soviet Russia, few people realize the extent to which Russian cities were similarly inundated with commercial publicity before the 1917 Revolution. Advertising was as inescapable a fact of daily life for the city dwellers of 1900 as it is for their descendants in the 1990s. Shop signs covered many of the grand architectural façades, posters filled columns, walls, windows, and public transport, pedestrians had thrust at them flyers offering discounted prices or free trinkets in this or that shop. The home, too, was commercial terrain: brand packaging for staples as well as luxury products sat on household shelves, direct-mail advertising solicited the patronage of wealthier residents, and mass-circulation newspapers devoted up to half their pages to advertisements (which in many cases brought in as much income as subscriptions and street sales combined). The advertising industry was booming in the last decade of Imperial rule. In Moscow and St. Petersburg alone the number of advertising agencies rose from thirteen and seven respectively in 1896, to thirty-one and thirty-six in 1914. Advertising was at once the messenger of commerce, the financial linchpin of the mass-circulation press, and a new avenue of enterprise in a society that had traditionally offered few outlets for initiative.

The onslaught of commercial publicity testifies to Imperial Russia’s participation in the emergence of a consumer revolution more commonly associated with Western Europe and the United States. This revolution, an integral if secondary facet of the industrial revolution, expanded the boundaries and pleasures of discretionary consumption beyond the...
wealthy elite to include most members of urban society. Mass production created mass consumption. Rosalind Williams, in her elegant history of this phenomenon in France, places the onset of the consumer revolution at about 1850, when mechanized production drastically reduced the cost of traditional goods like clothing, soap, and such processed consumables as tea and tobacco, discretionary income among the general population began to rise, and the focus of industrial innovation began to shift from the means of production to such consumer products as bicycles, telephones, and electric lighting. Given the time frame of industrial acceleration in Russia, these developments occurred in the late rather than mid- nineteenth century; certainly by the late 1890s the growing money economy and increased production of consumer goods were changing the material culture of daily life for millions of ordinary people.

The consumer revolution was slower to affect rural than urban life; for those in the cities, however, it reached all levels of society. Some might assume that the poverty of the workers in turn-of-the-century Russia precluded them from any discretionary consumption, but among those crowded into damp basements were many who spent part of their meager incomes on tobacco and cheap liquor. Such purchases were discretionary in a strictly materialist sense, but essential from the viewpoint of many workers seeking release from the exhaustion and monotony of their daily existence. And however economists might define them, these purchases clearly rendered the working class targets of advertisers and manufacturers. The consumer revolution, therefore, was more than just a middle-class phenomenon. The poor cannot be excluded.

The advertising that filled urban Russia’s streets and homes thus addressed the entire socioeconomic spectrum, with goods from the cheapest brands of *papiroxy* (Russian-style cigarettes) affordable to the workingman’s pocket, to expensive perfumes for the most affluent consumer. The world of consumption beckoned all and sundry; consequently, advertising became one of the most persistent and pervasive of the voices offering new choices and goals in Russia’s emergent public sphere.

For over a decade historians of Russia have been expanding our understanding of late Imperial urban society as more than the backdrop for revolutionary movements. In the last decades of the Empire, major Russian cities were bustling, not just with social unrest and

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3On the rise of Russia’s domestic market see Peter I. Lyashchenko, *History of the National Economy of Russia to the 1917 Revolution* (New York, 1970); and Paul R. Gregory, *Russian National Income, 1885–1913* (Cambridge, England, 1982). Russian retail sales roughly doubled between the 1890s and 1910s (ibid., 204). As an example, the tobacco industry Empire-wide almost doubled total production (from 31 million rubles in 1897 to 58 million in 1908) even before the economic upswing of 1909. For cigarettes alone, the numbers sold increased from 6 billion to 10.4 billion from 1897 to 1908 (West, “Constructing Consumer Culture,” 219–20).

political ferment but also with multiple possibilities of life in a rapidly modernizing environment. New occupations, entertainments, goods, and ideas introduced elements of choice and self-definition that were surely part of the city’s attraction for long-time residents as well as for many of the newly urbanized millions.

In the process of selling goods, advertising played its part in this cultural mélange by touting innovation and advocating the development of personal aspirations and the indulgence of individual pleasures. From this perspective, advertisers were implicitly contributing to the pace of change and, regardless of their own politics, helping to undermine the foundations of traditional Russia, in which the autocratic state purported to define social identities and to grant opportunities from above.

As Russian merchants, manufacturers, and their advertising specialists attempted to create a culture of consumption, then, they also disseminated their own visions of modernity to a population adapting to urbanization and industrialization. Advertising represented the business community’s platform for deliberate communication with the public and as such serves as a cultural record of the advertisers themselves. The messages which they chose to address to their audience bespoke their conceptions of that audience. The images in advertisements reflected, not society per se, but their creators’ views of it and of how they believed or wished their public to see it. Advertising is not a mirror of reality, but neither is it fiction. It has been called “capitalist realism” because advertisers, then as now, collectively projected their own desired consumerist society, yet based their appeals on what they judged would strike a resonant chord with the greatest possible number of people. Their advertisements were thus manipulative, but simultaneously grounded in perceptions of an actual society.

Before turning to the advertisements themselves, it is important to identify their sponsors. Who were these advertisers who filled the streets and daily press with their solicitations? As a whole, they reflect the diversity of the business community itself, which by the twentieth century was no longer restricted by soslovie (estate) or nationality. The most persistent and creative publicists tended to be either foreigners, often long established in Russia, or those Russian business people most willing to change with the times and see beyond the narrow confines of traditional trade practices that relied on reputation or aggressive individual salesmanship at the shop door. Business trade journals repeatedly associated modern (by which was usually meant printed) methods of advertising with progressiveness. While inertia prevented many small merchants from putting money into publicity

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5In the pre-World War I period most merchants and manufacturers produced their own advertisements, sometimes in close cooperation with hired writers, artists and agents (West, “Constructing Consumer Culture,” 53–55; 121–28). Advertising agencies did little independent creative work. Thus the term “advertisers” here refers to sponsors and creators collectively.

6The subject here is the advertisers’ intentions and perceptions rather than their actual influence. Even late twentieth-century market research cannot positively prove advertising’s effectiveness despite the multimillion dollar industry at its disposal. See Michael Schudson, Advertising, The Uneasy Persuasion: Its Dubious Impact on American Society (New York, 1984). In early twentieth-century Russia, there was no market research, and little evidence to show one way or another how people responded to commercial publicity.

7The term is Schudson’s (ibid., 214).
throughout the prerevolutionary period, many others did begin to invest in advertising, as attested to not only by business journals of the time but also by the burgeoning advertising pages of the daily press. By the 1910s—the heyday of Russian advertising—hundreds of commercial advertisements per day filled each major newspaper.8

More particularly, the most innovative advertising tended to predominate among industries with the stiffest competition in the consumer market, those factories producing ever greater quantities of basically similar goods such as liquor, cigarettes and tobacco-related products, or soaps and cosmetics. These industries were in the forefront of the growing emphasis on consumer products for the mass market. They, more than any others, promoted the accessibility of nonessential goods for all. In each of these industries, foreign-born entrepreneurs owned several factories—with a higher proportion of foreigners in the cosmetics trade than in tobacco or liquor—yet the Russian companies were just as persistent and innovative in their advertising. It was competition, not Western origins, that made for advertising pioneers in Russian manufacturing. Energy and ambition to compete made these advertisers aggressive proponents of progress—“missionaries” of modernity, as Roland Marchand has called their American counterparts.9 They were motivated first and foremost by the search for profits, yet not all were devoid of a loftier sense of mission.

Daniel Pope has defined the difference between traditional and modern advertising as a shift in emphasis from simply giving information to attempting to persuade.10 Although many traditional forms of advertising, such as the use of store barkers, were aggressively persuasive, it is true that, in Russia as in the rest of Europe, print advertising underwent the transformation Pope describes. Whereas mid-nineteenth century advertisers would merely list as many of their goods as possible, by the end of the century, merchants and manufacturers were employing far more creative means to attract potential customers. Technology helped, with improvements in lithography and especially the introduction of half-tone engraving in the 1880s and 1890s, which allowed newspapers to use illustrations.11 But advertisements improved textually as well as visually, especially in the decade before World War I, when both the Russian economy and advertising industry were at their peaks. Some companies even hired writers to compose jingles or entertaining little stories. These attempts to capture attention and find resonance with the public transformed many advertisements from dry inventories to vehicles of culture. Advertisers traded on past and present, making free use of cultural stereotypes and customs, as well as trying to create new demand by expanding horizons and introducing novelties. It is representations of the modern rather

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8For references from business trade journals see West, "Constructing Consumer Culture," 112–15. For advertising content of Peterburgskaiia gazeta between 1867 and 1917 see ibid., 307–8. In 1912 the average number of retail trade advertisements in this paper was eleven times higher than in 1867. The overall average number of advertisements had gone from 13 to 474 per day (half of which were classifieds).
than the traditional, however, that form the focus here. How did advertisers go about selling the fruits of modern industry to a population still undergoing the transition from traditional life?  

In the unrelenting pace of change that characterized the late Imperial Russian city, advertising rendered novelty a virtue. One of the most common slogans was “Posledniaia novost’!!!” (The very latest)—the clarion call for anything from perfume to light bulbs. New meant better, and newness became a selling point in and of itself. Even when the innovation rested only in the invention of a different brand name, it was announced with the bold lettering and blaze of exclamation marks of a ground-breaking discovery.

Yet newness was more than a slogan. It was associated with the perceived characteristics of modernity—the technological progress of modernization, the material improvement of life, and the Enlightenment ideals of rationality and science conquering nature. Advertising appealed and responded to all these perceptions, as well as to the individual sense of unease that was the reverse side of the modern coin.

In the industrial age, the growth of industry was practically synonymous with the idea of progress. Manufacturers rarely shared the Romantics’ horror at rural scenery disfigured by factory chimneys and smoke. On the contrary, industrialists both in Russia and the West proudly displayed smokestacks and industrial landscapes as dominant motifs in their advertising. Factory scenes were themselves romanticized, conflated with symbols of that very purity the critics felt was being destroyed. The Moscow cosmetics firm, S. I. Chepelevetskii and Sons, for example, decorated its company letterhead with a panorama of its extensive factory—chimneys, smoke plumes, and all—yet bordered the design with a classically adorned young woman breathing in the scent from a rose bush in full bloom. For a company making perfumes, the choice of roses was natural enough, but the point is that the inclusion of the factory was also seen as positive advertising. The Markov company also featured its smoking factory on the labels for its bottles of “purified” wine. While such images hardly seem consonant with purity in our environmentally conscious times, for turn-of-the-century manufacturers the factory chimney gushed progress, not pollution, and the plumes of smoke were something to be glorified rather than hidden. Some advertisers even turned depictions of factory smoke into curling, art nouveau-style border designs for their advertisements—industry was thus integrated into modern culture. Commercial design is, after all, where art and industry meet.

To associate their goods with progress, many advertisers went beyond simply depicting their factories to co-opt technological innovations that had nothing to do with the product in question. The Koeler company illustrated its advertisement for eau de Cologne with

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12The main sources for the advertisements cited are two of the most popular and widely circulated daily newspapers of the prerevolutionary years: Russkoe slovo, published in Moscow from 1895 to 1917, and Gazeta kopeika, published in St. Petersburg from 1908 to 1918. Most examples given are from the post-1905 decade, when advertising activity was at its height. On the rise of the commercial press and its importance in Russia see McReynolds, News under Russia’s Old Regime.

13On this tendency in Victorian British advertising see Lori Anne Loeb, Consuming Angels: Advertising and Victorian Women (New York, 1994).
a dirigible floating above Moscow accompanied by the slogan, “Higher than all eau de Colognes in quality.”¹⁴ The Shaposhnikov tobacco company claimed that its brands were the cigarettes of choice for the intrepid aviators who became public heroes with their aerial daring during the 1910s.¹⁵ In some cases, a product was visually metamorphosed into an unrelated modern invention, as in Figure 1. In this advertisement, a “telegram from the Dukat factory in Moscow,” is carried along telegraph poles made of giant cigarettes, bringing the message, “Try new Bis cigarettes.”¹⁶ With the sense of importance and urgency associated with telegrams over traditional forms of communication, the product here is both message and messenger, announcing to the Moscow public its own momentous arrival by telegraph. There was, in fact, nothing noteworthy about the advent of yet another cigarette brand in that already crowded market; all the more reason, then, to suggest the opposite. The more inundated the consumer was with choices of goods, the more creative the advertisers had to become. As they struggled to capture public attention, advertisers clearly felt that portraying their new brands as part of technological progress was a fruitful tactic. In this assumption, they simultaneously drew upon and perpetuated a popular fascination with modern innovations.

As the population in the major cities expanded by the tens of thousands every year, increased demand for goods intensified competition among the consumer industries. Prod-

![Fig. 1](image-url)

¹⁴ *Russkoe slovo*, 12 December 1909. It should be noted that most advertisements cited here appeared on more than one occasion and often in several publications. Only one appearance is given as reference.

¹⁵ *Gazeta kopeika*, 6 August 1911.

¹⁶ Ibid., 30 January 1910.
uct diversification was one way of fighting for a slice of the market. New brand names, packaging, and sales pitches for essentially identical products (especially in industries such as tobacco and cosmetics) were attempts to woo consumers away from rival firms and keep customers loyal through apparent variety.

Another way to keep pace with demand was to produce more goods through increased mechanization. Yet technical advances in the production process served promotional as well as functional purposes. Mechanization was an important selling point because quality was purported to improve automatically as machine labor in production grew and human participation decreased. Central to this belief was not only the pride in technological progress but also the concern over hygiene. The conditions of Russia's burgeoning cities, with their primitive sanitary services and frequent outbreaks of typhoid and cholera, and the educated population's perception of the working class as the unwashed and scarcely urbanized (that is, civilized) masses, combined to conflate mechanization with notions of quality and hygiene.

The Russian tobacco industry proudly advertised the rapid automation it underwent in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In 1897, for instance, the Moscow company, Laferm, promoted a new brand as one of the “wonders of technology ... produced from beginning to end on machines, without the touch of human hands.” Similarly, the St. Petersburg company, Kolobov and Bobrov, advertised its “Brio” brand as “mechanical cigarettes,” picturing a lone woman pulling the lever of a machine much larger than herself. Perhaps the starkest example of valuing machine over human production is Katyk’s advertisement for gil’zy, empty cylinders made for filling with loose tobacco (Figure 2)."
The prominent slogan “WITHOUT HANDS” is accompanied by a peasant woman with amputated arms, while the text emphasizes that “the marvelous tubes of Katyk are manufactured without the touch of hands; only with machines. That is why Katyk’s tubes are the most hygienic. REMEMBER THIS.” The (unsurprisingly) surly and unkempt peasant worker could no longer taint the product. Indeed, the manufacture of гил’зы had been the third largest women’s domestic industry until mechanization of the process began in the late 1890s. Katyk was thus graphically challenging the still-recent association of its goods with rural, and presumably unhygienic, domestic production.

Some advertisers mitigated this disdain for the touch of lowly workers with a desire to educate and uplift them. While as producers the common folk might pollute, as consumers they were to be helped and integrated into washed society. The Zhukov soap company’s slogan, “Cleanliness is the enemy of microbes,” was doing more than exploiting the common fear of disease—it was educating the ignorant (Figure 3). The anthropomorphized microbes gave comic yet visible shape to the invisible source of infection.

Such didactic undercurrents often were clearly class-based. The fiftieth-anniversary

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21Русское слово, 16 May 1909.
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publication of the Brocard cosmetics firm made a great point of praising the late owner for a keen interest in the "democratization of his goods." Brocard believed that both hygienic and elegant products should be accessible to even the poorer classes, and to this end he sold "People’s soap" for one kopek a bar. Before that, claimed the author, soap had been virtually unknown in the villages, but then everyone began to wash which with "People’s soap," and the name of Brocard became ubiquitous. "Thus," concluded this loyal chronicler, "it is necessary to state as fact the undoubted influence of the cheaper production of hygienic toiletries on the tidiness and, consequently, on the health of the people." Modern industry was to be seen as an agent of beneficent transformation, the manufacturer as socially useful rather than simply a self-interested profiteer. In the face of pervasive antipathy toward business pursuits, Russian industrialists had long engaged in cultural patronage, philanthropy, and paternalistic care for workers as means of proving their social worth. Commercial publicity was another way of conveying that image. An advertisement’s primary purpose was to sell goods, but if it could also suggest its sponsor’s concern for society at large, so much the better.

As with provisions for their workers’ welfare, the advertising image of manufacturers as paternalistic enlighteners was often heavily tinged with condescension, especially when addressing a specifically lower-class audience. The common folk were shown accepting the modern fruits of technology with the wonder or incomprehension of a child or simpleton. In one advertisement for Phillips light bulbs, for instance, a peasant couple gaze adoringly at their new source of light as if it were a gift of magic, and in another a teacher uses a blackboard to explain the economy and simplicity of the light bulb to a decidedly moronic-looking adult class. The assumption evident in such advertisements is that the benefits of modernity were to be generously imparted by the educated to the ignorant, who would receive them with gratitude. When they projected this function for themselves, advertisers seemed consciously to take on the role of missionary, but the religion in question was the material promise of enhanced consumption.

The filtering down of knowledge and well-being involved a hierarchy not only of class but also of geography. As the manufacturer was to the peasant/worker, so the city was to the provinces and countryside. The boons of the modern age would come from the city, as was succinctly expressed in an advertisement for Belousov gil’zy that shows a peasant couple, the man pointing to the distant urban horizon, over which towers the lettering "20th CENTURY" (also the brand name of the product). In a rival advertisement of the same year, a newcomer from the provinces asks a policeman why the name Viktorson was so "glorified" in Moscow. After explaining the qualities of these gil’zy, the policeman concludes: "This isn’t the countryside here, you know—it’s the capital. They’re good judges of everything,"

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22 Zolotyi jubilei parfumernogo proizvodstva tovarishchestva Brokaro v Moskve, 1864–1914 (Moscow, 1915), 15.
23 See, for example, Alfred J. Rieber, Merchants and Entrepreneurs in Imperial Russia (Chapel Hill, 1982); Jo Ann Ruckman, The Moscow Business Elite: A Social and Cultural Portrait of Two Generations, 1840–1905 (DeKalb, 1984); and Mark D. Steinberg, Moral Communities: The Culture of Class Relations in the Russian Printing Industry, 1867–1907 (Berkeley, 1992).
24 Russkoe slovo, 10 September and 2 October 1911.
25 Ibid., 21 October 1907.
why not taste too?” The provincial responds with matter-of-fact acceptance of the city’s superior status and promises to spread the news back home.26 The city was thus the source of progress and the arbiter of taste—leader and teacher for the underprivileged village.

From their urban centers, advertisers depicted the civilizing spread of their consumer goods to all the reaches of the Empire. The commodity was portrayed as a unifying force for Russia as a whole. In Figure 4, Einem cocoa forms a river flowing from its Moscow-based cup “throughout all Russia.”27 The country is made one through universal consumption.

The projected diffusion of advertising’s consumerist new world stretched not only from city to village but also beyond the boundaries of Russia. In this process Russia was both recipient and distributor, villager and urbanite. The transfer of goods throughout the global market by the early twentieth century effectively integrated Russia into the web of international commerce, a fact that forced manufacturers to compete with Western rivals. Foreign businesses advertising in Russia stressed the country’s incorporation into the world market as an opportunity for Russians to enjoy quality consumer products equally with the West. In Figure 5, the fingers of the giant hand indicate all the countries where “Cupid” records and gramophones were made, linking Russia with Germany, France, England, and

26Ibid., 27 November 1907.
27Ibid., 15 February 1912.
America—all reigned over by a gramophone player as mighty as the rising sun. “We know,” reads the text, “what the public of the whole world wants in the field of gramophones.” Russians thus belonged to this global community of gramophone owners—they could feel they were part of the international consumerist vanguard.

Russian manufacturers responded to the international market in various ways. The centuries-old dilemma of Russia’s identity vis-à-vis the West found its contradictory expressions also in advertising. Some companies appropriated and imitated Western styles as the ideal, while others proclaimed Russian goods as superior to any in the West. In the field of fashion, it had long been and remained acceptable openly to admire and adopt Western trends; in other industries accustomed to the standards of domestic production, Russian manufacturers tackled the international competition with bravado, claiming their goods were superior and beloved the world over.

The tobacco industry was most brazen in its assurances of premium quality world

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28Ibid., 21 November 1912. Gramophones did catch on in Russia; half a million were sold between 1900 and 1907 (Stites, Russian Popular Culture, 15).
wide. In a ditty entitled “Truth,” the Dukat company boasted:

Go around the world,
Inquiring everywhere,
But nowhere will you find
A sweeter cigarette than “Ira.”
And now everyone loves it
For its magical aroma
And everywhere they only smoke
“Ira” from the factory of Dukat.²⁹

Few firms, however, were loath to appropriate the aura of Western sophistication in naming some of their brands. The untranslated names “Adorable,” “Select” (Chepelevetskii perfumes), and “Sir” (Kolobov and Bobrov cigarettes, purporting to “answer modern taste”)³⁰ imparted a touch of cosmopolitan refinement that, it was hoped, would appeal to a distinguished clientele.

Foreign and Russian companies alike seized upon Western fads that reached Russia and incorporated them into their marketing so as to present products in the light of the very latest fashions. At the end of 1913, newspaper pages were full of the newly popular tango, and several manufacturers jumped on the bandwagon, from record companies to perfume and champagne firms. “The last word in fashion” (крекмоды), proclaimed the Khristoforov company, was to “meet the New Year with ‘Tango’ champagne.”³¹ And the Rallet company announced its new line of perfume in time for Christmas with the following lines:

The fashionable dance—
the fashionable scent
“Tango”
intoxicating
exciting.³²

Through such enthusiastic assimilation of international trends, businesses promoted the vision of Russia as a country in step with cosmopolitan fashions and included in the evolving consumer culture of the West.

International integration did not mean losing step with Russia’s own cultural rhythm, however. Those same manufacturers of “Tango” champagne and perfumes would as enthusiastically advertise new product lines for Orthodox Easter, Saints’ days, celebrations of Pushkin’s birth, or the tricentennial of the Romanov dynasty. Cumulatively, such juxtapositions promoted a consumer culture that surpassed the purely imitative. The blending of tradition and innovation, Western and Russian, spoke to a population that constantly bridged similar divides. Simply through their responses to everyday life, advertisers and consumers alike were forging a peculiarly Russian version of modernity.

²⁹Russkoe slovo, 8 April 1912.
³⁰Ibid., 29 November 1912.
³¹Ibid., 28 December 1913.
³²Ibid., 24 December 1913.
Yet building a culture of consumption in Russia was also a deliberate endeavor from the advertisers’ point of view; they had first to popularize a new identity—that of consumer. One way of doing this was to dramatize the quantity of products sold, from which an individual was to infer not only quality but the popularity of the product. Consumption was thus portrayed as a mass activity; not to participate left one entirely out of the mainstream. In 1899 the Laferm tobacco factory was already advertising the number of cigarettes sold in a day with the slogan, “By quantity judge quality,” and it continued this emphasis during the following decades. In what might seem to us an ironic foreshadowing of McDonald’s presence in 1990s Moscow, a Laferm campaign of the 1910s depicted a man holding up a sign with the slogan, “More than 500,000,000 sold in 1911!” Other tobacco companies entered the advertising race for declared sales increases. The Shaposhnikov firm proclaimed that “Not by the day—but by the hour! The demand for ‘Eva’ cigarettes grows.” And the Shapshal tobacco firm depicted the stampede-like demand for its “Kumir” cigarettes with a mob made up of mixed social classes rushing the gates of the factory while the watchman shouts, “Go away! Back!!! You’re too late!!! All the Kumir for today have been sold!!! Ten million!!! There are no more!!!” (See cover). If deprivation of this brand-name product was a cause for riot, the suggestion was that consumption of it was as necessary as bread and as universal as breathing air. To be human was to be a consumer.

Mass consumption was also shown to create its own sense of community. Enjoyment of a common product was enough to bring people together in a kind of consumerist camaraderie. The beer advertisement in Figure 6 shows a motley if rather well-to-do gathering: “We all drink Zemlianskoe beer,” they declare, as if this were reason enough for their happy commingling. The term zemliachestvo, meaning an association or community of fellow countrymen and women, enjoyed a particular significance in urbanizing Russia, where recent immigrants to the city found support and friendship among clusters of fellow villagers.
or provincials. In brand name and illustration, the Zemlianskoe beer advertisers were evoking a sense of belonging based on consumption rather than geographic origin—an affiliation of beer as strong as that of native soil.

To belong to the community of consumers demanded a knowledge of consumer goods. Thus advertisers set about educating the public, often deliberately suggesting that those who bought their products were on some kind of inside track of useful information. Those on the outside were not only excluded from the “in” group but also made to seem behind the times or even neglectful of their families’ interests. “You really hadn’t heard?” accused an advertisement for bicycles that were supposedly “ahead of the rest.”38 Clearly, those who had not heard were hopelessly out of touch. Such knowledge was assumed in a Shustov advertisement that began, “You know, of course, that rowanberry liqueur is the favorite drink of the Russian public?”39 Unspoken in this statement was the insinuation that anyone who did not know (or did not agree) was simply ignorant of an obvious and commonly accepted fact. Advertisers might even take on a tone of exasperation, as if the public was being unreasonably obdurate in not learning its lessons on commodities: “It is high time” (davno pora), exclaimed the Ermans food company, “for every housewife to know that the best seasonings for all dishes and preserves are only the ‘Delikatess’ products of K. Ermans and Co.”40 Being a good consumer was thus something to be learned, a skill without which one could not take care of a family or even be a full member of society. In advertising’s classroom, knowledgeable consumption was tantamount to good citizenship.

Advertisers’ ideal citizen was, naturally, a modern, consuming citizen—one who knew where to turn to fulfill his or her constant need of replenishment and satisfaction. This perfect consumer is portrayed at length in an advertising poem for Shustov cognac (here translated only in part). It is, significantly, entitled “The Modern Way” (Po sovremennomu):

Ivan Ivanovich Milovzorov
Lives the modern way,
And without superfluous discussions
He follows after progress.
All the modern novelties
For Milovzorov are law...
Whatever has appeared on the market—
He acquires in an instant.
In his apartment the furniture is in the “new style,”
For guests he always has a wide welcome,
There are no horses: Ivan Ivanovich
Sees the use of the automobile.
Persistently following aviation
He is building a bold plan:
So that he can soar swiftly up to the heights,
He is getting an airplane!

38Ibid., 16 May 1909.
39Ibid., 11 September 1909.
40Ibid., 8 March 1914.
He knows no melancholy,
He says that sadness is nonsense,
And to all wines prefers
Shustov's fine cognac!41

Being modern here means buying the latest and the best—the goods define the life. Ivan Ivanych is happy because he wholeheartedly accepts the idea that material comfort and progress are the point of existence. For him, consumption is a philosophy as well as a pleasure. This is consumerism before the term was invented.42 To stress the point, Ivan's grumpy opposite appeared a month later in another advertising poem, "The Backward Man." This gloomy obscurantist rejected electricity, cars, and medicine, did not believe people could fly, and, of course, did not drink Shustov's cognac.43

The Shustov poems were tongue-in-cheek, yet they expressed in humorous, exaggerated form what most advertisers wanted to communicate: that consumption was the way to well-being, culture, and comfort. The purchase of a single item, the consumer was to believe, could enhance daily life and open up new cultural horizons. Sellers of musical instruments and equipment in particular emphasized these notions. Not only could the gramophone "avoid boring evenings," but the auto-piano could bring instant talent into any home: "Each member of the family can immediately (not knowing music) play artistically on the FONOLA-PIANO."44 With modern technology, musical evenings at home were no longer the preserve of the well-educated elite.

Health was also at stake in the choice of commodities, according to some advertisements. Those companies struggling to compete in an industry producing a plethora of similar goods stressed brand selection as a key to well-being. This was especially true of the tobacco industry, in which many factories fought for dominance in the vast Russian market.45 The Dukat company used emphatic visual imagery to suggest the results of a correct choice in cigarettes (Figure 7).46 The healthily plump, self-satisfied man asks his sunken, sullen colleague which brand he smokes. "Whatever comes along," is the response. "That's no good. I smoke only 'Novost' (Novelty) from the Dukat factory, and I can't praise them enough. I advise you to do the same. You'll thank me for it." Clearly, the reader was to believe that the thin man would also become jolly and robust if he followed his friend's advice. And, conversely, the reader himself could expect to deteriorate physically and psychologically unless he chose the recommended cigarettes.

41Gazeta kopeika, 11 December 1911.
42Robert Bocock defines consumerism as "the active ideology that the meaning of life is to be found in buying things and pre-packaged experiences." See his Consumption (London, 1993), 50. The term "consumerism" was coined in the post-World War II era in response to what was seen as a developing ideology of consumption and planned obsolescence.
43Russkoe slovo, 18 January 1912.
44Ibid., 21 September 1912 (The Gramophone company); ibid., 30 October 1911 (I. F. Muller in Moscow).
45There were 241 tobacco factories in the Russian Empire in 1908. See Svod statisticheskikh dannykh po fabrichno-заводской промышленности с 1887 по 1926 год (Moscow, 1929), 82.
46Russkoe slovo, 17 January 1910.
If commodities were the source of good living, they were also its reward. The Flegontov department store, for example, liked to advertise to the person “who is thrifty, economical, and, together with that, likes good, elegant things; to obtain a solid bed, good mattress, beautiful washstand, that person will of course turn to our shop.” With Protestant-style reasoning, this advertiser assured the tentative customer of modest means that consumption was not profligacy but instead just recompense for upright living. The prize for self-discipline was a solid bed and the material comforts of an adequately furnished home. Here was the serious counterpart to Shustov’s caricatured consumer.

In advertising’s manipulative world, however, products more often came larger than life—sometimes literally. It had not been uncommon throughout the nineteenth century for tradesmen to hang oversized models of their merchandise over shop doorways to attract customers’ attention. But in the print illustrations of modern advertising, giant scale also served another purpose: to make the ordinary extraordinary, to lift consumption out of the daily routine and prove the centrality—even transcendence—of goods in contemporary life.

47 Ibid., 29 November 1909.
48 For beautiful reproductions of Russian shop signs see Alla Povelikhina and Yevgeny Kevtun, Russian Painted Shop Signs and Avant-garde Artists (Leningrad, 1991).
The advertisement for gramophone records in Figure 8 makes this point emphatically and cleverly, with very few words.\footnote{Gazeta kopeika, 25 January 1909 ("Clear the road for Zonofon!").} Police escorts clear the way as a huge "Zonofon" record rolls impressively through Red Square. Not only is the record larger than the people making way for it, it is independently mobile. This remarkable new product arrives like a VIP on a state visit and demands that people stop whatever they are doing to take notice. Such images were clearly intended to impart to consumer products a life of their own and an importance disproportionate to their size and relative monetary value. They were to signify the arrival of modern material culture, capable of transforming daily life; the new commodities were mundane yet magical, and (in theory) accessible to all.

This apparent leveling of material opportunity present in consumer culture has been
called by critics a “democracy of surfaces” because of its superficial and partially illusory nature. All may look and be tempted, not all can buy. Yet dreams can be as much a part of lived experience as reality, and advertising certainly offered its dreams of excitement and satisfaction to rich and poor alike. The basic notions of personal development and individual fulfillment as worthy and reachable goals were disseminated with little regard for socioeconomic or traditional divisions, further blurring whatever semblance of clearly defined social categories remained in Russia on the eve of the Revolution. Advertising’s lure of a material promised land spoke to all.

Along with the promise of progress, however, advertisers also had to acknowledge the anxieties and frustrations of modern life. The ever-growing city, in particular, was fraught with problems, from physical ones of noise, overcrowding, and disease, to psychological ones of strain and depression. Yet in the boundless realm of advertising, consumers need look no further than the pages of the daily newspaper for solutions to such problems. They could splash on a dab of eau de Cologne to refresh themselves in the “heavy, stifling atmosphere of the big city with its vast, nerve-shattering street traffic.” If they were troubled instead by a vaguer sense of unease, then patent medicines and electro-therapy could come to the rescue: “Just as the past hundred years have been called the age of discoveries and inventions, the twentieth century could justifiably be named the nervous century,” began a typical advertisement for a patent medicine. So when modern life sapped human psychic and physical strength, modern science and industry could restore them, if not through the ubiquitous cure-alls, then with ingenious inventions such as the “Rejuvenator” electrical belt, touted as the “savior of mankind” for a “nervous and sickly age.” Whatever troubled you, there was a product for your salvation. A 1909 advertisement for the Katyk company captured this tongue-in-cheek fashion (Figure 9). A man with a gun to his head cries, “It’s not worth living! There’s nothing perfect in the world!” “Fool!” answers the advertisement, “Stop and remember that there are Katyk’s cigarette tubes.”

While advertisers often poked fun at their own propagandizing in such ways, the cumulative effect of their messages was to portray a utopia of modern goods, where scientific and industrial ingenuity met the material and spiritual needs of the people. Whether in humorous or serious style, advertising promised, at the very least, greater physical comforts, and at most a fulfillment of life’s purpose. Although on the surface advertisers were simply seeking increased sales, they were also promoting a new social ethos—more consciously than unconsciously, in my view—an ethos in which goods defined modern life and

51While it does not contradict the point that advertising addressed all levels of society, an exception to the disregard for socioeconomic status existed within tobacco advertising—one of the few markets where similar goods were clearly differentiated by price. Cigarettes were promoted to all income levels, but often quite differently to the lowest priced market. This is the topic of a future article, however. For more see West, “Constructing Consumer Culture,” 219-41.
52Russkoe slovo, 19 September 1912 (“No. 4711” eau de Cologne).
53Gazeta kopeika, 10 June 1912.
54Ibid., 11 January 1909.
led to personal happiness. To fit into twentieth-century society, Russians were to become consumers first and foremost, above all other identities. In the anonymous, uprooted, and largely secular world of the modern city, goods were offered as anchor, guide, and ultimate reward. That this message was deliberately exaggerated and manipulative does not nullify the underlying belief which emerges from many advertisements: manufacturers saw consumption as a civilizing force, for individuals and for Russia as a whole. The promotion of a consumer culture was good for business, but it was also consonant with a vision of progress into the modern age. Advertising was far more than a byproduct of Russia’s prewar economic growth; it was a normative influence in a society that was breaking free of traditional bounds and becoming increasingly diverse and cosmopolitan.