Selling to the Masses: Retailing in Russia, 1880-1930
by Marjorie L. Hilton (review)

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va uses the organizing framework of the chronotope and ethnolinguistic frontiers to emphasize blurring boundaries across a wide range of social estates and national groups. Gabdrafikova re-creates in great detail the experiences of elite Tatars throughout the Russian Empire, chronicling how they contributed to the modernization and secularization of Tatar society one decision at a time. Given that Gabdrafikova focuses on urban experiences not only in Kazan, but in other Russian cities too, I found myself hoping for more analysis about how and why daily life differed across these urban environments. Otherwise the cities risk running together, leaving behind only a vague urban backdrop for modernization and secularization. More engagement with the historiography of urban history could have been helpful here. Still, Malyshева and Gabdrafikova’s books do much to show the diversity of life in Russia, particularly outside St. Petersburg and Moscow, and should serve as exemplars for future work in this field.

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Citizens of the British Commonwealth and seasoned royal watchers are used to the commodification of the House of Windsor, with images of Diana, Kate, William, and George emblazoned across mugs, ceremonial plates, and tea towels. Such tacky excesses are usually assumed to stem from the pervasive commercialism of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century capitalism. However, as Marjorie Hilton shows us in her excellent Selling to the Masses: Retailing in Russia 1880–1930, pictures of the Romanovs were ubiquitous in shops, on foodstuffs and cosmetics in late imperial Russia. From the “Tsarina’s Cream” line of cosmetics to “Aleksandra,” “Imperial,” and “Rodina” cookies, members of the imperial family were not merely distant objects of reverence but also everyday symbols of the accessibility of elegance, refinement, and nobility. This small example is just one of the many Hilton offers to buttress her argument that far from being inherently backward, retailing in late imperial and early Soviet Russia exhibited many of the traits we asso-
As the case of the Upper Trading Rows demonstrates, efforts to re-make Russian retailing were never merely about buying and selling; rather, the construction of a grand arcade in the Russian nationalist style was a “self-conscious attempt to aesthetically capture the meaning of contemporary urban life, to reconcile past, present and future into one grand architectural statement” (P. 31). As Hilton demonstrates in subsequent chapters, nationalism as well as Orthodox religion were essential elements of the modern Russian retailing culture of the late imperial period, an observation that underscores her insistence that religion and modernity should not be seen as dichotomous in the Russian context. Merchants in Moscow opened their stores with ceremonial blessings, while popular forms of Russian Orthodoxy were “enmeshed in urban life” (P. 91), in part through the sale of religiously themed merchandise such as chocolates for religious holidays, traditional Easter food, and wine and cognac for Passover and Rosh Hashanah (P. 92). Thus, far from being diametrically opposed, Hilton argues with a Weberian flourish that religion and capitalism coexisted comfortably in late imperial cities, a fact heretofore underappreciated by historians of Russia.

As they did with so much else, World War I and the Revolution
caused drastic disruptions and changes to the Russian retail market, although socialism was not as great a break in the culture of consumption in Russia as one might have thought. Hilton’s argument is one that very much emphasizes continuity between the late imperial and early Soviet eras rather than all-encompassing change, pointing to the remarkable similarities between post-1905, New Economic Policy (NEP)-era, and even high Stalinist programs to remake shopping as a productive, educational, and enlightened practice. In this way, her work is in line with scholars who see the late imperial and early Soviet periods as a “continuum of crisis” (in Peter Holquist’s words) rather than radically discontinuous epochs.¹

In Chapter 6, Hilton examines the dismantling of the capitalist commercial sector and the foundation of state-run and cooperative stores that followed the Revolution (one small critique of Hilton’s otherwise exemplary coverage of this period is the very short shrift given to the Provisional Government and its struggles to deal with provisioning crises after February 1917). Hilton examines in detail the nationalization – or more pertinently, municipalization – of retail businesses through the Supreme Council of the Economy (VSNKh). As she paints it, this process was an ad hoc, chaotic one that combined spontaneous seizures and expropriations with rapidly oscillating policy vis-à-vis private enterprise. Ideologically, of course, the Bolsheviks hewed closely to the notion that all retail trade must be abolished; Hilton quotes Lenin declaring that the sprawling Sukharev market formed “the basis of capitalism,” which “lived in the souls and actions of every small time proprietor” (P. 187). However, shortages and the imposition of rationing meant that in practice, patterns of buying and selling were improvised, with a flourishing black market and underground retail trade. With the introduction of the NEP, the Soviet state commenced its first experiment with rebranding retail trade as something potentially “socialist,” by which Soviet men and women were to learn how to conduct their everyday lives in a socialist way, in part through buying and selling items in state-run and cooperative stores. Particularly in model enterprises such as GUM (as the newly converted Upper Trading Rows were known from 1921), men and women were encouraged to “indulge in fantasies of consumption and shop for clothing in a luxurious environment made possible by a benevolent socialist regime” (P. 186).

In this way, the privations of the revolution and war years were to be erased by the promise of abundance provided by the socialist state, an (unfulfilled) promise that ultimately had the counterproductive effect of politicizing shopping in a culture of shortages.

Throughout *Selling to the Masses*, Hilton pays special attention to the ways in which the dynamics of buying and selling interacted with gendered cultural and social norms in both imperial and Soviet Russia. As she argues in Chapter 4, critics of the new, “modern” retail market frequently framed their attacks as concern for the damage that new modes of buying and selling were supposedly doing to the natural gender order. In response, the paradigm of the new, idealized male *kommersant*, a rational, bourgeois salesperson, emerged in opposition to the half-peasant *kupets*, as many retailers attempted to present themselves as leaders of a just and efficient market place (P. 111). Such images of the idealized male retailer contrasted with those of women as frivolous, profligate shoppers, slaves to fashion, who were equated with irrationality and the libido (P. 124). The essentialization of gender roles in the marketplace by both critics and defenders of the retail sphere continued after the revolution. This time, NEP-era bureaucrats and commentators attempted to salvage the retail sector as a potentially socialist arena by privileging working-class male consumers in idealized images of shopping. Thus, post-1921 GUM “did not conceive of itself as a ‘woman’s paradise’ but as a legitimately masculine arena where men were enjoined to partake in the material bounty proffered by the revolution” (P. 216).

Providing a richly researched cultural and social history of both buying and selling in the late imperial and early Soviet periods, *Selling to the Masses* is a crucial contribution to the historiography on the economy and everyday life in Russia. Furthermore, while emphasizing similarities with west European and North American retail modernities, Hilton’s work also provides a unique perspective on the history of consumption by exploring the first attempt in global history to socialize the retail market. As such, her work is invaluable not only to Russian historians but also to historians of consumption outside the region, who wish to explore the ramifications of war, revolution, shortages, and economic collapse for the everyday acts of buying and selling.