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ARTICLE

Lower-Class Reading in Late Imperial Russia

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Abstract

This article demonstrates widespread engagement of lower-class people with the written word in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Russian Empire, in rural and urban locales, in homes, workplaces, and social spaces. We explore how lower-class people read: the daily habits, personal relationships, and social spaces that shaped engagement with texts, and especially collective reading, a widespread phenomenon that extended the reach of the written word to less- or non-literate audiences. Many lower-class Russians experienced reading as a collective, public, aural activity, not a solitary, private, internal one. Reading was entwined with the rhythms of everyday social life and provoked critical thought and active engagement within countless lower-class reading groups, as evidenced by collective letter-writing and observations of post-reading discussions. This article therefore contributes to scholarship exploring lower-class Russians' conscious and meaningful engagement with the textual world, and by association with late imperial Russia's transforming social and political spheres.

> In long evenings, winter or autumn, when the peasants have nothing to do, they gather in some hut or another, and make someone read some sort of book to them. The peasant, who can read clearly and distinctly, takes a book, and begins to read. The others listen, smoking *makhorka*.
>
> — Aleksandr Kuz'mich Aristarkhov, Chancery employee, Vologodsk district, Vologda province, 1899.

In the last decades of the empire, Russia's reading culture grew as never before. Literacy increased dramatically, popular literature transformed print culture, and the mass-circulation press boomed. Texts were everywhere, especially after the 1905 Revolution, when censorship was relaxed and the printing industry expanded. Despite these dramatic transformations, however, an enduring image exists of late imperial Russia as an illiterate empire where textual culture reached, at best, the 15 percent of the population living in cities or, at worst, only narrow circles of educated readers within that milieu.[1] In this article we challenge that idea by demonstrating widespread engagement with the written word in late imperial Russia, in rural and urban locales, in homes, workplaces, and social spaces.

[1] See the discussion in Stephen Lovell, *The Russian Reading Revolution: Print Culture in the Soviet and Post-Soviet Eras* (Basingstoke, 2000), 10–14.

We are especially interested in *how* lower-class people read: the daily habits, personal relationships, and social spaces that shaped engagement with texts.[2] We explore collective reading, a widespread phenomenon that extended the reach of the written word to less- or non-literate audiences, from the end of the nineteenth century to the February Revolution of 1917. Scholars have discussed the acceleration of lower-class engagement with printed news during international conflicts.[3] Our work frames this acceleration as emerging from a rich tradition of collective engagement with the written word, intersecting with scholarship exploring the wide circulation of the written word among lower-class Russians through confessional practices, legal processes, and other circumstances.[4] We offer a distinct contribution to the scholarship on late imperial print culture by bringing together urban and rural readers, emphasizing similar lower-class reading practices along the urban/rural gradient rather than studying cities, towns, and villages in isolation from each other.[5]

By the turn of the twentieth century literacy in the Russian Empire was more widespread than ever before. On the 1897 imperial census, 26.5 percent of Russian subjects aged 10 or older identified themselves as literate.[6] Estimates of subsequent growth suggest that 40 percent of the population had some degree of literacy by 1917. Literacy was higher among urban, male, and younger demographics and lower in rural, female, and older demographics, reflecting the success of expanded education in the late nineteenth century and the mass migration of better-educated rural youths into cities.[7] Official literacy rates did not reflect ability to fluently read and write but did indicate at least some reading skill, especially for simpler texts.[8] Allowing for regional variation, by the late imperial period most urban Russians had some level of reading skill and most rural areas had some literate residents. Rising literacy, in turn, stimulated demand for the printed word. Popular literature and mass-circulation periodicals flourished, reaching a growing population of poor and less-literate readers as well as the traditional reading public of educated middle- and upper-class Russians.[9] Rapid development of a

[2] We use the term "lower-class" to incorporate urban and rural people from the lower strata of society. We recognize the imperfections of this term, but alternatives (ordinary people, plebeians, working class, or peasant, for example) are also fraught with imperfection. For comparison see the similar approach by Mark Steinberg and Stephen Frank, who use "lower-class" to note "the inadequacy of simple and rigid categories such as *peasants* or *workers* to express the variety of situations, mentalities, and even identities among the urban and rural poor." Stephen P. Frank and Mark D. Steinberg, eds., *Cultures in Flux: Lower-Class Values, Practices, and Resistance in Late Imperial Russia* (Princeton, 1994), 3.

[3] Scott J. Seregny, "Zemstvos, Peasants, and Citizenship: The Russian Adult Education Movement and World War I," *Slavic Review* 59:2 (2000): 290–315.

[4] See, for example, Jane Burbank, *Russian Peasants Go to Court: Legal Culture in the Countryside, 1905–1917* (Bloomington, 2004); Nadieszda Kizenko, *Good for the Souls: A History of Confession in the Russian Empire* (New York, 2021); and Mark D. Steinberg, *Proletarian Imagination: Self, Modernity, and the Sacred in Russia, 1910–1925* (Ithaca, 2002).

[5] On this subject, Abram Reitblat similarly notes that labor migration "helped unify the reading habits of workers and the reading habits of the peasants." See Reitblat, "The Reading Audience of the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century," in *Reading Russia: A History of Reading in Modern Russia*, ed. Damiano Rebecchini and Raffaella Vassena, vol. 2 (Milan, 2020), 203.

[6] *Pervaia obshchaia perepis' naseleniia Rossiiskoi Imperii 1897g. v 89 tomakh* (St. Petersburg, 1897–1905), vol. 1. Literacy figures from the 1897 census are available at http://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/rus_age_97.php?reg=0.

[7] Ben Eklof, "Peasant Sloth Reconsidered: Strategies of Education and Learning in Rural Russia before the Revolution," *Journal of Social History* 14:3 (1981): 355–85; Jeffrey Brooks, "The Zemstvo and the Education of the People," in *The Zemstvo in Russia: An Experiment in Local Self-Government*, ed. Terence Emmons and Wayne S. Vucinich (Cambridge, England, 1982), 243–78; Ben Eklof, "The Myth of the Zemstvo School: The Sources of the Expansion of Rural Education in Imperial Russia: 1864–1914," *History of Education Quarterly* 24:4 (1984): 561–84; idem, "The Adequacy of Basic Schooling in Rural Russia: Teachers and Their Craft, 1880-1914," *History of Education Quarterly* 26:2 (1986): 199–223; Boris N. Mironov, "The Development of Literacy in Russia and the USSR from the Tenth to the Twentieth Centuries," trans. Ben Eklof, *History of Education Quarterly* 31:2 (1991): 229–52; Tracy Dennison and Steven Nafziger, "Living Standards in Nineteenth-Century Russia," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 43:3 (2013): 397–441. Much work on literacy studies European Russia in isolation. However, census data suggests that figures for European Russia and the larger empire were likely not far apart: on the 1897 census, literacy figures for those aged 10 or older were 28.6 percent in European Russia compared to 26.5 percent across the empire.

[8] Mironov, "The Development of Literacy in Russia," 243–46; Jeffrey Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read: Literacy and Popular Literature, 1861–1917* (Princeton, 1985), xiv–xv; Ben Eklof, *Russian Peasant Schools: Officialdom, Village Culture, and Popular Pedagogy, 1861–1914* (Berkeley, 1986).

[9] Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read*; Louise McReynolds, *The News under Russia's Old Regime: The Development of a Mass Circulation Press* (Princeton, 1991).

domestic printing industry and censorship reforms after 1905 accelerated late imperial Russia's boom in textual production and circulation.[10]

Despite widespread interest in the growth of literacy and print culture in late Imperial Russia, we still do not fully understand how reading became part of Russians' everyday lives. Jeffrey Brooks has written the most detailed studies of lower-class reading, masterfully exploring the value of literacy, the ways literacy gave Russians agency, and the importance of Russia's emerging popular literature.[11] But even these studies only touch on reading's place in the rhythm of daily social life. Occasional references to collective reading aside, even the most nuanced studies conceptualize reading as a predominantly solitary pastime and analyze readers as individual consumers, rather than treating reading as a social activity.[12] Nor has this literature placed reading within patterns of daily life to ask not just what lower-class Russians read but where, when, and how they read it within the interwoven fabrics of urban and rural lives in a time of urbanization and widespread migration.[13]

Drawing on *fin-de-siècle* ethnographic studies, memoirs, and the periodical press, this article reimagines reading as a recurring social practice in late imperial Russia and readers as a community of ubiquitous informal reading groups. Less-literate or illiterate Russians consumed texts by listening to more literate friends, neighbors, and workmates before discussing those texts as a group, allowing readers and listeners to digest the written word together. Our ethnographic sources come from fourteen published volumes of material collected by Prince Tenishev's ethnographic bureau between 1898 and 1901, including survey responses from 167 correspondents in thirteen central Russian provinces. These ethnographic materials are neither comprehensive nor exhaustive, and ethnography itself presents significant challenges for the social historian.[14] Nevertheless, we use this material critically, by situating ethnographic observers as information producers. We also make extensive use of cheap newspapers aimed at poor and less-literate readers that emerged across the empire between 1905 and 1914, following the example of *Gazeta-kopeika* in St. Petersburg.[15] These sources limit our scope within the complex multiethnic Russian Empire to Russian-language texts and readers. However, given the prominence of Russian-language print media in the imperial public sphere and the broad geographic scope of our ethnographic and periodical material, our source base still allows us to assess reading practices in diverse spaces and communities across the empire. Readers in cosmopolitan Odessa and rural Novgorod province did not have identical life experiences and literary encounters, and no single study can fully convey the rich variety of local particularities in the early twentieth-century Russian Empire. Nevertheless, by exploring Russian-language print media from

[10] On the development of Russian printing see Mark D. Steinberg, *Moral Communities: The Culture of Class Relations in the Russian Printing Industry 1867–1907* (Berkeley, 1992), 7–32. On censorship reform and the growth of print media after 1905 see Charles A. Ruud, *Fighting Words: Imperial Censorship and the Russian Press, 1804-1906* (Toronto, 1982), 218–26; and McReynolds, *The News*, 198–252.

[11] See, by Jeffrey Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read*; *The Firebird and the Fox: Russian Culture under Tsars and Bolsheviks* (Cambridge, England, 2019); and "Readers and Reading during Russia's Literacy Transition, 1850-1950: How Readers Shaped a Great Literature," in *The Edinburgh History of Reading, Volume 2: Common and Subversive Readers*, ed. Mary Hammond and Jonathan Rose (Edinburgh, 2020), 137–56.

[12] Despite occasional references throughout the literature, collective reading has not been explored in depth. See, for example, Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read*, 23–24, 27–30; McReynolds, *The News*, 256; Daniel R. Brower, "The Penny Press and Its Readers," in *Cultures in Flux: Lower-Class Values, Practices, and Resistance in Late Imperial Russia*, ed. Stephen P. Frank and Mark D. Steinberg (Princeton, 1994), 156; Mark D. Steinberg, *Petersburg Fin de Siècle* (New Haven, 2011), 35; Leonid Borodkin and Evgeny Chugunov, "The Reading Culture of Russian Workers in the Early Twentieth Century (Evidence from Public Library Records)," in *The Space of the Book: Print Culture in the Russian Social Imagination*, ed. Miranda Remnek, trans. Gregory Walker (Toronto, 2011), 148; Brooks, *The Firebird and the Fox*, 95, 205, 251 and Color Plate 27; idem, "Readers and Reading," 139; and Stephen Lovell, *How Russia Learned to Talk: A History of Public Speaking in the Stenographic Age, 1860–1930* (Oxford, 2020).

[13] On the interconnections between urban and rural space see Daniel R. Brower, *The Russian City Between Tradition and Modernity* (Berkeley, 1990); Barbara Alpern Engel, *Between the Fields and the City: Women, Work and Family in Russia* (Cambridge, England, 1994); Jeffrey Burds, *Peasant Dreams & Market Politics: Labor Migration and the Russian Village, 1861-1905* (Pittsburgh, 1998); and Lutz Karl Häfner, "Engines of Social Change? Peasant Migration and the Transgression of Spatial, Legal and Cultural Divides in Late Imperial Russia," *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 34:4 (2019): 547–70.

[14] See the discussion in Sarah Badcock, "Time Out from the Daily Grind: Peasant Rest in Late Imperial Rural Russia," *Slavonic and East European Review* 100:4 (2022): 679-680.

[15] On *Gazeta-kopeika* see Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read*, 130–41; and McReynolds, *The News*, 228–39.

multiple perspectives, we find that there were striking similarities in how lower-class people in late imperial Russia engaged with the printed word across space and time.

We argue for the ubiquity and significance of the written word in late imperial Russia. Lower-class people read voraciously, individually and socially, for leisure, pleasure, education, information, and religious observance. Illiterate or less-literate Russians were deeply engaged with the empire's textual world through daily reading habits and practices of collective reading whereby more literate people shared the written word with their friends, relatives, and colleagues.[16] This argument builds on theories of "aurality," or the transformation of oral performance through use of the written word, meaning that listeners knew they were hearing a fixed text composed by a writer other than the reader. Aurality distinguished collective reading from traditions of oral storytelling, encouraged listeners to contextualize what they heard within a larger corpus of known texts, and allowed groups to synthesize knowledge through discussion.[17] Many lower-class Russians experienced reading as a collective, public, aural activity, not a solitary, private, internal one. Reading was entwined with the rhythms of everyday social life and provoked critical thought and active engagement within lower-class reading groups, as evidenced by collective letter-writing and post-reading discussions. Our thesis contributes to scholarship exploring lower-class Russians as conscious and cognate humans who engaged meaningfully, on their own terms, with the textual world, and by association with Russia's transforming social and political spaces.[18]

COLLECTIVE READING

> In the inns very often one can see even such a scene: One of the peasants reads the newspaper, and the remainder listen, accompanying the reading with drinking tea.
>
> — Aleksei Vasilevich Balov, ethnographer,
> Poshekhonsk district, Yaroslavl province, 1898–99.

In social spaces across the Russian Empire, lower-class people read together, building on Russia's long, rich traditions of reading aloud and oral storytelling from memory. In rural spaces, priests were key interlocutors between parishioners and the word of God, and listening to the written word was an important religious practice in the Russian Orthodox faith.[19] By the late 1800s, secularization and popular literacy democratized and diversified lower-class access to the written word.[20] In family, community, and more formalized settings, people gathered to listen to readings for education and entertainment.[21] These practices intensified during international conflicts, when people eager for

[16] This argument contradicts some recent scholarship arguing for minimal textual penetration among lower-class Russians. See especially Ilya Gerasimov, *Plebeian Modernity: Social Practices, Illegality, and the Urban Poor in Russia, 1906–1916* (Rochester, 2018), 4; and Boris N. Mironov, "The Cognitive Abilities of the Russian Peasantry at the Turn of the Twentieth Century," trans. Markus C. Levitt, *Russian History* 46:2–3 (2019): 103–24.

[17] Joyce Coleman, *Public Reading and the Reading Public in Late Medieval England and France* (Cambridge, England, 1996), 27–32.

[18] See, for example, Jeffrey Brooks, "Popular Philistinism and the Course of Russian Modernism," in *Literature and History: Theoretical Problems and Russian Case Studies*, ed. Gary Saul Morson (Stanford, 1987), 90–110; Steinberg, *Proletarian Imagination*; Jane Burbank, *Russian Peasants Go to Court*; Corinne Gaudin, *Ruling Peasants: Village and State in Late Imperial Russia* (DeKalb, 2007); Hans-Christian Petersen, "On the Margins of Urban Society? Inequalities and the Differentiation of Social Space in a Metropolis of the Modern Age – St. Petersburg 1850–1914," *InterDisciplines. Journal of History and Sociology* 2:1 (2011): 85–111; and Daniel Schrader, "'You Don't Treat Parliaments That Way!' Revolutionary Practices of Representation at Samara's Peasant Congress, May–June 1917," *Slavonic and East European Review* 99:3 (2021): 484–519.

[19] Leonid Heretz, *Russia on the Eve of Modernity: Popular Religion and Traditional Culture under the Last Tsars* (Cambridge, England, 2008), 28–31; Scott M. Kenworthy, *The Heart of Russia: Trinity-Sergius, Monasticism, and Society after 1825* (Washington and New York, 2011), 192–94.

[20] Abram Reitblat, "The Book and the Peasant in the Nineteenth Century and the Beginning of the Twentieth Century: From Illiteracy to the Religious Book to the Secular Book," in *Reading Russia: A History of Reading in Modern Russia*, ed. Damiano Rebecchini and Raffaella Vassena, vol. 2 (Milan, 2020), 317–45.

[21] Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read*, 30.

news gathered to hear the literate read newspapers aloud.[22] Collective reading of secular and religious texts was an integral part of daily life and leisure for urban and rural lower-class Russians just as it was elsewhere. In historical settings from Georgian England to early twentieth-century Mexico, as literacy spread throughout the population, literate members of social groups read texts aloud to others.[23]

Who read to whom?

More-literate members of a group read texts aloud, while less-literate people listened. Afterwards, groups often discussed readings, deciphering texts together and determining their relevance to group members' lives. The social dynamics of collective reading differed from group to group: sometimes parents read to children, sometimes children read to elders, sometimes one literate worker read to colleagues, and so on. For group members with fewer traditional sources of authority, especially children and youths, literacy may have empowered those occupying lower positions in traditional social hierarchies.[24] Our rural ethnographic sources suggest children and youths were empowered within the family, but they contain no examples of women reading to family members. In contrast, we have found several examples of groups of urban women gathering for collective readings.

Even rudimentary literacy let individuals read and share texts aimed at lower-class audiences, which tended to use clear, concise, and simple language for accessibility's sake.[25] Kopek newspaper editors, for instance, recognized that many potential audience members were not fluent readers and writers: they were people "for whom it is easier to work with a hammer, paint walls, craft boots, package goods" than wield a pen.[26] They may not know "where to put the *yat* and where the *e*," but editors were certain they could access simple prose.[27] Evidence suggests that this idea was correct. Early Soviet research found that "less-literate" (*malogramoten*) readers with only limited rural schooling could still read prerevolutionary kopek papers.[28] One woman later recalled that despite reading nothing since graduating from rural school as a child, she was literate enough that, during the First World War, soldiers' wives at her workplace took turns buying kopek papers and having her read aloud to them.[29] Less-literate readers also facilitated group reading in rural areas, where multiple accounts mention that illiterate people were particularly keen to listen to readings, though audiences also included the literate.[30] Igor Grigor'evich Shadrin reported that in Kadnikovsk uezd, Vologda province, "one can sometimes hear the slow monotonous reading of a literate person and former student at the village school" on winter evenings, and that "one can see solemn emotion in the faces of the surrounding family members, listening with reverence to the often slow witted reader."[31] Limited literacy was

[22] Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read*, 28–29; Seregny, "Zemstvos, Peasants, and Citizenship."

[23] E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York, 1963), 712; Robert M. Buffington, *A Sentimental Education for the Working Man: The Mexico City Penny Press, 1900–1910* (Durham, NC, 2015), 11; Coleman, *Public Reading and the Reading Public*.

[24] Brooks argues that the literacy of female schoolteachers or small children "challenged patriarchal values" and contributed to "changes in traditional roles" by empowering women and youths (*The Firebird and the Fox*, 95).

[25] See Brooks, "Readers and Reading," 141–42.

[26] Mikh. Bezsonov, "Melochi zhizni," *Iuzhnaia kopeika*, May 18, 1915, 2.

[27] M. Perel'man, "O 'nashem chitatele' (Mysli vslukh)," *Ezhednevnaia gazeta-kopeika*, September 22, 1916, 2–3. The *yat* was a letter eliminated in the 1917–18 orthographic reform of the Russian language, which when spoken was nearly indistinguishable from the letter *e*.

[28] E. O. Kabo, *Ocherki rabochego byta: opyt monograficheskogo issledovaniia domashnego rabochego byta* (Moscow, 1928), 99–100.

[29] E. Komissarova, "Rabotnitsa sittsenabivnoi fabriki," in *Raduga trekh gor: iz biografii odnogo rabochego kollektiva*, ed. A. Spitsyna (Moscow, 1967), 123.

[30] Dmitrii Aleksandrovich Baranov et al., eds., *Russkie krest'iane. Zhizn', byt, nravy. Materialy "Etnograficheskago biuro" Kniaza V. N. Tenisheva*, 7 vols. (St. Petersburg, 2004–11), 2.1:280.

[31] Ibid. 5.2:774–75.

enough to consume simple texts, and even a single less-literate group member could facilitate reading on behalf of an entire group.

In rural and urban spaces, readers were chosen according to reading skill and availability. As a result, children and youths were the most common rural readers.[32] Aleksandr Akimovich Zhukov, a teacher from Totemsk district, Vologda province, noted that literate elderly people were not fluent enough to read aloud comprehensibly, setting them apart from the best readers, those who were "sufficiently fluent and correct" to attract both family members and neighbors to listen. Teenagers, he added, were the most reliable readers because they had finished school but were too young to go out strolling and flirting with their friends, as young adults did.[33] The newspaper editor F. F. Lashmanov reported that in the remote villages of Bortnikovsk county, Tarussk district, Kaluga province, most peasants were illiterate due to a lack of local zemstvo schools. Nonetheless, villagers loved to listen attentively to readings by literate visitors. Literate children were sources of great pride for a family, and on winter evenings whole families gathered to listen to literate kids read "what was written in the little book."[34] Adults read less than children because they had less free time, but they were proud and supportive of their children's literacy; illiterate adults spoke with sorrow that they were "blind" because they had not been taught to read.[35] Victor Veniaminovich Golokhov, a priest's son from Vologodsk district, noted that in his parish literacy levels were increasing rapidly, and that those who were illiterate listened intently to readings, often given by boys who had finished their studies at the zemstvo school: "It often happened that I see, in a village hut by the light of a splinter (*luchino*) or a lamp, sitting in the front corner under the icons, a boy reading a book with religious-moral content to two or three illiterate elders, who sit and weep."[36]

Shared reading experiences were often central to images of newspaper audiences. On multiple occasions, an *Odesskaia pochta* journalist pictured his readers passing around wrinkled copies of the newspaper in taverns and discussing its contents, demonstrating the importance of reading as a social activity outside of work and family settings.[37] Letters to newspaper editors indicate that images of collective reading were accurate. Numerous letters were signed by groups of workers, sometimes by dozens of workers at once.[38] Other letters were signed by whole families, indicating shared or collective reading in homes as well as workplaces and social spaces.[39]

Writing collective letters indicated a higher level of engagement than shared reading: to write and sign letters, readers probably discussed newspapers' contents and how to respond to them. On occasion, letters made this explicit. For example, three collective letter-writers to *Odesskaia pochta* noted that their response originated when "we gathered, a group of girls, and began to discuss your *feuilleton*."[40] In another instance, a group of workers reading *Odesskaia pochta* collectively before work, one reading aloud to the rest, came across a story about a missing child. One recalled seeing the child earlier that day, so they fetched him and brought him to the newspaper office to be reunited with his mother.[41] In this account, communal reading from a single newspaper reached multiple readers

[32] Ibid. 7.1:194.

[33] Ibid. 5.4:167–68.

[34] Ibid. 3:580–81.

[35] Ibid. 2.1:280, 5.1:219.

[36] Ibid. 5.1:219.

[37] Faust, "Dni nashei zhizni: sumerki Moldavanki (Prodolzhenie)," *Odesskaia pochta*, March 18, 1911, 2–3; Faust, "Dni nashei zhizni," *Odesskaia pochta*, October 7, 1912, 3.

[38] Such letters were ubiquitous. See, for example, "Fond pogibaiushchikh: Pis'ma v redaktsiiu," *Moskovskaia gazeta-kopeika*, May 20, 1909, 4; "Eshche k 1000-mu nomeru 'Odesskoi Pochty'," *Odesskaia pochta*, October 6, 1911, 3; and "O 'Gazete-Kopeike' (Iz chitatel'skikh pisem)," *Ezhednevnaia gazeta-kopeika*, November 4, 1916, 2.

[39] For example, "Eshche k 1000-mu nomeru 'Odesskoi Pochty,'" *Odesskaia pochta*, October 8, 1911, 4.

[40] Faust, "Pochemu devushki ne vykhodiat zamuzh (Otvety na anketu Fausta)," *Odesskaia pochta*, November 20, 1910, 2. In early twentieth-century Russian journalism, a *feuilleton* was a recurring column combining reporting, commentary, and entertaining satire.

[41] "Rebenok naiden!! (Pri posredstve gazety 'Odesskoi Pochty' naiden propavshii rebenok tachechnika)," *Odesskaia pochta*, May 2, 1909, 2–3.

through one literate group member, and listeners absorbed enough to connect reporting to their own experiences and intervene to correct a problem identified in print.

As the writer and ethnographer S. A. An—skii (Shloyme Rappoport) observed in 1913, collective readings in the countryside were followed by listeners reflecting on what they had heard and adding their own stories and memories to the discussion.[42] This process, of listening and then discussing the reading, demonstrates listeners' active engagement with texts, which facilitated understanding and learning.[43] In Tikhvinsk district, Novgorod province, Mikhail Pavlovich Shakhotskii reported that peasants gathered at the district (*volost'*) administration to hear the village scribe read *Sel'skii vestnik*, after which the group discussed the contents at length.[44] These conversations facilitated engagement and understanding even on "alien" topics. A reading about India, for example, attracted rapt attention from villagers in Zhizdrinsk district, Kaluga province. Afterwards, they recounted their own understandings and experiences of the contents. One man recalled that as a soldier he had hunted a tiger in the Amur region; another had seen an elephant when a wild animal display visited Khar'kiv.[45] Vasilii Antipovich Antipov, a teacher from Cherepovets district, Novgorod province, described how readings stimulated extensive discussions, ranging beyond the text and into other topics of conversation. He added that peasant-led readings were more successful than those organized by teachers or priests because "at every unfamiliar word they pause and clarify what it means," helping engagement and comprehension.[46] The literate read and the illiterate listened, but readers and listeners understood texts not only by reading and listening but by actively discussing and contextualizing them. Whether they collaborated on a written response or simply paused to work through a text's meaning, lower-class readers and listeners took the time to digest and make sense of readings together.

Collective reading, already a common practice, became even more widespread after Tenishev's ethnographic work in 1898–1901. By the First World War, collective reading was ubiquitous. A Saratov journalist reporting on the wartime village wrote that "instead of vodka, peasants reach for the newspaper and the book. They read together, in groups, and then peacefully discuss what they have read."[47] Wartime surveys of Moscow province found that countless circles formed to read newspapers and journals together, and groups would recirculate texts to others after finishing them. Readings could be sizable: an agricultural circle from Vitebsk province noted that their readings of war news grew from 28 peasants attending the first reading to over 200 by the sixth.[48] Ninety-four percent of respondents to one survey planned to organize collective readings, leading a commentator to conclude that "collective reading is extremely widespread in villages. Not everyone can subscribe to a newspaper on their own, not everyone in villages can read, and moreover not everyone is capable of understanding what is written in newspapers – hence the need for collective reading and the exchange of views about what is read."[49] In cities, towns, and villages across the Russian Empire, people read together. The written word reached lower-class Russians regardless of their location, literacy level, or amount of disposable income.

[42] S. A. An—skii, *Narod i kniga: Opyt kharakteristiki narodnago chitatelia* (Moscow, 1913), 113–14.

[43] E. N. Medynskii, *Vneshkol'noe obrazovanie: Ego znachenie, organizatsiia i tekhnika* (Moscow, 1916); idem, *Kak vesti besedi po politicheskam voprosam: Metodicheskie ukazaniia, konspekti i spiski literaturi dlia lektorov, uchitelei i pr.* (Moscow, 1917); idem, *Kak organizovat' i vesti selskie prosvetitel'nye obshchestva i kruzhki* (Nizhnii Novgorod, 1918).

[44] *Russkie krest'iane* 7.4:247.

[45] Ibid. 3:107–8.

[46] Ibid. 7.2:227–29, 7.2:246–48.

[47] A. Ts., "Ozdorovlenie dereven'," *Saratovskaia zhizn'*, October 27, 1914, 2.

[48] Vl. Murinov, "Gazete v derevne (Po pis'mam v komissiiu po rasprostraneniiu gazet pri moskovskom o-ve gramotnosti)," *Vestnik vospitaniia* 27:4 (1916): 178–79.

[49] I. Stepnoi, "Chto chitaet derevenskoe naselenie Moskovskoi gubernii," *Dlia narodnago uchitelia*, no. 17 (1916): 27.

What did they listen to?

Lower-class people accessed multiple forms of shared texts, from newspapers and journals to books, pamphlets, and *lubok* texts.[50] This section focuses on the distribution and collective reading of cheap newspapers and periodicals, for three reasons. First, periodicals were regular publications providing a steady stream of new reading material, facilitating reading as a recurring habit. Second, periodicals were available at prices as low as a single kopek (or for free in shared spaces like taverns), meaning they were often the most accessible reading material for poor readers.[51] Finally, prior work has already established that lower-class Russians in urban and rural regions had widespread access to books through institutions like schools, reading rooms, public and workplace libraries, and private collections.[52] The explosion of cheap print media after 1905 is not reflected in the ethnographic material we draw on here, which dates from around 1900. However, it demonstrates that rural readers were also committed to and engaged with the periodical press even before the post-1905 print media boom.

It is difficult to estimate how many people one copy of a newspaper or book could reach. Lower-class Russians often pooled subscriptions or frequented social spaces where many readers could share texts. Population density and easy availability of cheap daily newspapers meant newspaper circulation was certainly higher and more diverse in Russia's towns and cities. Self-improvement activities demonstrate that skilled and semi-skilled urban workers and the unskilled poor were enthusiastic consumers of cheap reading material.[53] These readers shared what they bought with their colleagues in the workplace and after work. Semion Kanatchikov's worker association (*artel'*) in Moscow, for example, subscribed to the newspaper *Moskovskii listok*. Kanatchikov's recollections about group interests suggest shared reading and discussion in addition to shared purchasing.[54] Informal gathering spaces like Tiflis's Athena Cafe also advertised that "all local and capital-city journals and newspapers are available for reading," demonstrating that institutional subscriptions could reach any number of patrons.[55]

Producers of texts, aware of these dynamics, encouraged and capitalized on collective reading practices. *Iuzhnaia kopeika*'s publisher estimated in 1912 that five people read every issue of his newspaper, theorizing an audience of 200,000 readers based on daily circulation of 40,000.[56] The journalist Vlas Doroshevich estimated an even higher level of collective reading when he guessed that on average seven people read each issue of *Russkoe slovo* during the First World War.[57] Collective readers may not have paid for additional copies, but larger audiences allowed editors to claim greater social influence and justify higher advertising rates.

While the density and variety of periodicals was lower outside cities, many rural Russians still read and listened to newspapers. The most mentioned newspaper subscription in the rural areas surveyed here was *Sel'skii vestnik*, in part because Tenishev's survey was conducted before the post-1905

[50] On *lubok* literature, including collective reading of *lubki*, see Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read*, 59–108; Reitblat, "The Book and the Peasant," 326–35.

[51] On this subject, see also Reitblat, "Reading Audience," 205.

[52] Ben Eklof, "The Archaeology of 'Backwardness' in Russia: Assessing the Adequacy of Libraries for Rural Audiences in Late Imperial Russia," in *The Space of the Book: Print Culture in the Russian Social Imagination*, ed. Miranda Remnek (Toronto, 2011), 108–41; Borodkin and Chugunov, "The Reading Culture of Russian Workers"; Reitblat, "The Book and the Peasant," 335–43.

[53] See, for example, Semion Ivanovich Kanatchikov, *A Radical Worker in Tsarist Russia: The Autobiography of Semion Ivanovich Kanatchikov*, ed. and trans. Reginald E. Zelnik (Stanford, 1986); Eduard M. Dune, *Notes of a Red Guard*, ed. and trans. Diane P. Koenker and S. A. Smith (Urbana, 1993); Deborah Pearl, *Creating a Culture of Revolution: Workers and the Revolutionary Movement in Late Imperial Russia* (Bloomington, 2015); and Felix Cowan, "The Democracy versus Democracy: Representation and Politics in Odessa during the 1912 State Duma Election," *Revolutionary Russia* 33:2 (2020): 180–86.

[54] Kanatchikov, *A Radical Worker*, 13.

[55] Advertisement, *Kur'er-kopeika*, October 17, 1913, 4.

[56] Grigorii Shvarts, "Glasnomu Iozefi," *Iuzhnaia kopeika*, September 7, 1912, 2.

[57] McReynolds, *The News*, 256. McReynolds notes that this may have even been an underestimate because "peasant communes had begun subscribing to newspapers in greater numbers and *Russkoe slovo* was most often the paper of choice."

expansion of print media. *Sel'skii vestnik* was an official government organ, published in St. Petersburg since 1881. It contained news and information about the rural economy, and correspondence from the regions.[58] Subscriptions were usually taken by district administrations, taverns and inns, tea rooms, and the libraries that mushroomed under zemstvo tutelage from the 1890s onwards.[59] In a discussion of the rising value of literacy among rural communities, the priest's son Ivan Ivanovich Golubev from Nikol'sk district, Vologda province, noted that locals cited the ability to read the newspaper, specifically *Sel'skii vestnik*, as a key benefit of literacy.[60] In Porogelovsk volost, Totemsk district, Vologda province, several peasants traveled to the *volost* administration three or four times a month to read *Sel'skii vestnik*, which they prized for its interest in their daily life.[61]

Cases of individual peasants subscribing to newspapers before 1905 were relatively noteworthy. Aleksandr Andreevich Ivanov, a teacher from Borisovsk district, Novgorod province, said that those peasants who subscribed to a newspaper in his village were "peasant aristocracy, who had nothing in common with peasants." However, he also noted that several peasants in Belyi village subscribed to *Sel'skii vestnik*, which they liked because it was cheap and offered practical advice.[62] An old former soldier living in Poshekhonsk district of Yaroslavl lived in extreme poverty but nevertheless subscribed to *Sel'skii vestnik*, which he read from cover to cover.[63] Individual subscribers might attract crowds of neighbors for newspaper readings and sometimes passed on newspapers after finishing them, allowing one issue to reach multiple readers or reading groups.[64] In March 1917, one woman told Kiev's *Iuzhnaia kopeika* that thanks to it her whole village heard about the February Revolution, because after she had read it herself, "a crowd of peasants gathered and everyone listened to what was printed in the newspaper."[65] Finally, even when peasants did not subscribe to newspapers, newspapers could come to them. In 1910–11, for example, newspapers like *Moskovskaia gazeta-kopeika*, *Derevenskaia gazeta*, *Utro Rossii*, and *Russkoe slovo* distributed thousands of free copies to peasants in the provinces, probably trying to attract new subscribers.[66]

Institutional subscriptions also brought newspapers to rural areas. In Moscow province alone, hundreds of rural tea houses subscribed to newspapers like *Russkoe slovo*, *Moskovskii listok*, or *Trudovaia kopeika*.[67] Many tea houses also featured small libraries for patrons as one of several entertainment offerings.[68] In Yaroslavl province, the regional administration decreed that every tavern had to subscribe to *Sel'skii vestnik* and *Yaroslavskie gubernskie vedomosti*, and periodicals like *Novoe vremia* and *Syn otechestva* also appeared in taverns.[69] Yaroslavl's mandatory tavern reading material was not commonplace. Some other reports, including from Kaluga and Vologda provinces, mentioned

[58] On *Sel'skii vestnik* see James H. Krukones, *To the People: The Russian Government and the Newspaper* Sel'skii Vestnick *("Village Herald") 1881–1917* (New York, 1987).

[59] See, for example, M. P. Iusupov, "Prosvetitel'naia deiatel'nost' zemstv Urala na rubezhe xix–xx vekov: Narodnye doma," *Vestnik Riazanskago gosudarstvennago universiteta im. S. A. Esenina* 49:4 (2015); Natalia V. Kazakova, "Organizatsiia narodnyi domov v dorevoliutsionnoi udmurtii nachala XX v.," *Idnakar: Metody istoriko-kul'turnoi rekonstruktsii* 28:3 (2015): 100–106; and Elena V. Alekseeva and Elena Y. Kazakova-Apkarimova, "People's Houses as Answers to the Challenges of Modernity in Europe and Russia," *RUDN Journal of Russian History* 19:4 (2020): 952–64. On libraries subscribing to newspapers see, for example, *Russkie krest'iane* 5.2:137–138.

[60] *Russkie krest'iane* 5.3:33.

[61] Ibid. 5.4:404.

[62] Ibid. 7.1:356–57.

[63] Ibid. 2.1:300–301.

[64] Ibid. 7.2:526–27. See also a story of an Odessan reselling his newspaper after finishing it: L. Rodionov, "Pereputala…," *Odesskaia pochta*, February 16, 1909, 2–3.

[65] M. Frenkel', "Pis'ma iz derevni," *Iuzhnaia kopeika*, March 25, 1917, 2.

[66] Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi istoricheskii arkhiv (RGIA), f. 776, op. 16, ch. 2, d. 347, ll. 37–38; ibid., d. 802, ll. 41–41ob.

[67] A. Glagolev, "Chto chitaiut v derevniakh Moskovskoi gubernii," *Novyi kolos*, no. 2 (January 15, 1917): 34.

[68] Audra Jo Yoder, "Tea Time in Romanov Russia: A Cultural History, 1616–1917" (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2016), 303.

[69] *Russkie krest'iane* 2.1:301.

that there were no newspaper subscriptions in inns or anywhere else in the region, and in some districts the only available newspaper was the district administration's copy of *Sel'skii vestnik*.[70] But locations completely lacking institutional subscriptions were rare. Ivan Petrovich Grigor'ev, a teacher from Varvansk district, Kostroma province, reported that in his area the local inns subscribed to *Sel'skii vestnik* and *Volgar* for their patrons.[71] In Poshekhonsk district, Yaroslavl province, the zemstvo-funded public library subscribed to fifteen newspapers and journals.[72] Even in the more limited publishing environment when the Tenishev surveys were conducted, newspapers and periodicals were frequent sights in rural regions, and their prevalence and diversity only increased over time.

READING HABITS

> There are cases, especially often recently with the opening of the parish library, that peasants and old women gather in the hut of a literate peasant, to listen to the reading of interesting books, interrupting the reading with sighs and remarks. The love of readings is great, and books little by little are beginning to crowd out oral storytelling and even maps.
>
> — Ilarii Grigor'evich Shadrin, priest's son and teacher, Vologodsk district, Vologda province, 1897.

For the countless Russians who read periodicals, reading was a regular habit rather than an occasional choice. Habits differed depending on circumstances, but lower-class readers found ways to fit texts into their daily lives, from a peasant from Poshekhonsk district, Yaroslavl, who read at home every evening with a cup of tea to N. A. Khait, an Odessan who insisted that he would rather give up breakfast than his morning newspaper.[73] Reading habits also depended on the spaces frequented by a reader or listener. Individual and collective reading happened in spaces of domesticity, labor, and sociability, depending on one's social milieu. Homes, workplaces, churches, taverns, tea houses, libraries, reading rooms, schools, streets, and public transportation were all sites where readers and listeners consumed, shared, and discussed texts.

In urban contexts, evidence indicates that lower-class readers preferred concise daily reading. Kopek papers knowingly appealed to the reader who, journalists imagined, was poorer, less literate, and had less free time. Advertising concise and accessible publications, they emphasized that they could be read in a single sitting because they were short and cut out irrelevant information.[74] *Minskaia gazeta-kopeika*'s editors expected readers to get through its 4–6 pages in just fifteen minutes, a span of time short enough to fit any daily routine.[75] Readers' own impressions aligned with editorial assumptions. One reader of Moscow's *Ezhednevnaia gazeta-kopeika*, for example, praised its accessibility: "Everything in [the newspaper] is clear, simple, and necessary for the layman (*obyvatel'*)." Others wrote that they "do not leave behind a single line in your newspaper" and read it "from beginning to end."[76] Concise, accessible texts allowed lower-class Russians to tailor reading to times and places that fit the rhythms of fast-paced lives.

[70] Ibid. 3:582, 5.2:258.

[71] Ibid. 1:68.

[72] Ibid. 2.1:299.

[73] Ibid. 2.1:280; "Po povodu napadok na 'Od. Pochtu' (Pis'ma v redaktsiiu)," *Odesskaia pochta*, November 16, 1912, 3–4.

[74] "Pered podpiskoi na gazety," *Moskovskaia kopeika*, November 26, 1912, 1.

[75] "No. 50," *Minskaia gazeta-kopeika*, October 4, 1912, 2.

[76] "O 'Gazete-Kopeike' (Iz chitatel'skikh pisem)," *Ezhednevnaia gazeta-kopeika*, November 4, 1916, 2.

Many urban Russians read newspapers early in the day. Some readers wrote to *Odesskaia pochta* that each morning they ran out to buy the newspaper even before drinking their tea.[77] Morning reading was often a family affair. As one reader put it, "my wife, children, and I wait impatiently each morning to read your *feuilletons* as soon as possible. We are so used to your newspaper that it seems we couldn't live without it."[78] Observers also noted that parents read stories from kopek newspapers to their children.[79] These readers enjoyed reading at home, facilitated by the ways texts spread around cities. Each morning, postmen delivered newspapers and their assorted supplements to subscribers. Those who did not pay up front for subscriptions could still buy the newspaper close to home, since paperboys (*gazetchiki*) stood on street corners and outside dwellings to sell the same newspapers to regular customers each morning. Richer families might send a servant to fetch the newspaper while poorer families might send their children; either way, readers got their morning newspaper. On weekends, they could buy serialized adventure novels from the same source.[80]

Others slotted reading elsewhere into their daily routines, especially around the workday. Many workers who did not read the newspaper at breakfast bought it from paperboys on their way to work, to read during their commute or workday.[81] In Tiflis, commuters enjoyed kopek papers on the tram.[82] In Odessa, four readers wrote that "we cannot sit down for lunch until we have read [*Odesskaia pochta*'s] *feuilletons*."[83] Street sales also spread texts throughout the Russian city in another fashion, as paperboys constantly shouted the day's most sensational headlines to entice passers-by. Across the empire, from Petersburg to Odessa, the din of the city included paperboys shouting the news.[84] Doing so vocalized the written word in a distinct way: unlike communal reading, it invited listeners to read a text for themselves. Even the urban soundscape was thus filled with text. As Peter Fritzsche notes of Berlin at the turn of the century, Russian cities were "word cities," filled with and interpreted through texts intended to be shouted, read, shared, and discussed within the daily rhythms of urban life.[85]

Besides work, home, and city streets, people congregated in social spaces like taverns, tea houses, restaurants, or cafes to read together. One free newspaper, hoping for wide readership to appeal to advertisers, distributed copies to hotels, restaurants, cafes, confectioneries, train stations, and streets across Odessa.[86] Distribution of cheap newspapers in social spaces was so widespread that in fictional sketches, paperboys sold *Kopeika* by "visiting cheap tea houses and taverns."[87] Even the bathhouse could be a reading space, as two memoirists recalled wealthier *bania* patrons in Petersburg reading newspapers in the changing rooms.[88] Images of readers at the time often centered on collective reading and discussion in these social spaces, offering a rebuttal to studies contrasting high numbers of social spaces like taverns with lower numbers of reading spaces like libraries to argue that most workers, for

[77] "Otklik chitatelei po povodu napadok na 'Od. Pochtu': Pis'ma v redaktsiiu," *Odesskaia pochta*, November 19, 1912, 5.

[78] "Po povodu napadok na 'Od. Pochtu,'" *Odesskaia pochta*, November 18, 1912, 4–5.

[79] M. Vadkovskii, "Prilozhenie k 'Vospominaniia o Mitropolite Antonii' (Otryvok iz dnevnika avtora)," *Istoricheskii vestnik* 38:1 (January 1917): 169–70.

[80] G. Stosnus, "Sanktpeterburg," *Novoe russkoe slovo* (New York), August 30, 1970, 4; R. Karter, "Tiflis – Tbilisi: Iz vospominanii," *Svoboda* 11:1 (115) (1962): 27; L. I. Borisov, "Roditeli, nastavniki, poety …," in *Kniga i chitatel' 1900–1917: Vospominaniia i dnevniki sovremennikov* (Moscow, 1999), 135; Petr Aleksandrovich Piskarëv and Liudvig L'vovich Urlab, *Milyi staryi Peterburg: Vospominaniia o byte starogo Peterburga v nachale XX veka* (Moscow, 2014), 39–41.

[81] Piskarëv and Urlab, *Milyi staryi Peterburg*, 40.

[82] Editorial, *Znak Tiflisa*, March 25, 1913, 1.

[83] "Po povodu napadok na 'Od. Pochtu,'" *Odesskaia pochta*, November 20, 1912, 4.

[84] Iakob Gaus, "Staraia Odessa," *Novoe russkoe slovo*, September 18, 1960, 2; Lev Uspenskii, *Zapiski starogo peterburzhtsa* (Leningrad, 1970), 40; Piskarëv and Urlab, *Milyi staryi Peterburg*, 41.

[85] Peter Fritzsche, *Reading Berlin 1900* (Cambridge, MA, 1998).

[86] "Ot Redaktsii Bezplatnoi Gazety Novosti Nedeli," *Novosti nedeli*, March 6, 1913, 1.

[87] I. Emel'ianchenko, "Bezdomnye: Ocherki: I. Noch' na Gope," *Sovremennyi mir* 23:2 (February 1913): 3. On communal reading in taverns see also Reitblat, "Reading Audience," 198–99.

[88] D. A. Zasosov and V. I. Pyzin, *Iz zhizni Peterburga 1890–1910-kh godov: Zapiski ochevidtsev* (St. Petersburg, 1999), 65–66.

instance, did not turn to reading for leisure.[89] Such a juxtaposition assumes that taverns and libraries were mutually exclusive, when in fact social spaces like taverns were frequently sites of collective reading. From home to work to spaces of travel and socialization, lower-class residents of late imperial Russian cities lived in a world overflowing with texts and found countless ways to fit reading into their daily habits.[90]

In rural areas, as in cities, reading was a regular component of leisure time. There are several important distinctions to make between urban and rural reading practices. First, in contrast to bustling urban streets saturated with opportunities to buy daily papers, villagers relied on postal subscriptions, trips to town markets, or irregular visits from itinerant peddlers for new reading material. Second, the rhythms of agricultural labor were regulated by climate, light, and the seasons, as opposed to those of factories, shops, and other waged spaces, which were determined by the clock and illuminated by artificial light.[91] As such, reading typically occurred in evenings by the light of a flame or oil light, especially in the long winter months, and on holidays.[92] The home was a central space of collective reading, facilitated by widespread rural lending libraries opened by schools, zemstvos, factory owners, and public activists. Villagers borrowed material to read at home, which often meant organizing collective readings with family, friends, and neighbors.[93]

As well as private readings in homes, rural spaces featured multiple forms of organized public readings. Several of Tenishev's correspondents noted regular readings in the church lobby on Sundays, when a literate person would read to both illiterate and literate listeners.[94] In Zhizdrinsk uezd, Kaluga province, the local priest organized Sunday readings on religion, history, and geography at the parish school, regularly drawing audiences of more than one hundred people "with men occupying the school benches, while old women and youths in close crowds stood in the square between the benches."[95] In Vologodsk district, Vologda province, the priest's son Golovkov reported huge interest and support for public readings at several sites in nearby villages. Regular readings on long, dark winter evenings, held in the village school and delivered by the teacher for up to two hundred listeners, were so popular that they were sometimes delivered twice so that everyone present could hear. On holidays, between breakfast and lunch, readings were held in the church lobby for dozens of people from different villages. In some of the bigger villages, students who had finished their course at the college (*nachal'nyi narodnyi uchilishche*) gave readings on holidays in the area's numerous butter factories, each attracting some twenty to forty listeners.[96]

This evidence indicates that lower-class Russians adapted reading to suitable spaces and times regardless of setting. The rhythms of rural and urban life differed, but the appetite for reading and listening existed everywhere. Lower-class Russians satisfied social, educational, and informational needs by gathering to read and listen wherever they had space and whenever they had time. Urban Russians read when they were not on the clock: in the early morning, at lunch, or in social spaces

[89] For example, Borodkin and Chugunov, "The Reading Culture of Russian Workers," 151.

[90] For comparison see the discussion of pervasive advertising in Sally West, *I Shop in Moscow: Advertising and the Creation of Consumer Culture in Late Tsarist Russia* (DeKalb, 2011), 19–61. West notes that advertising, which combined images and text, was everywhere in late imperial Russia: shop signs, posters, product packaging, public transportation, the periodical press, brochures distributed through the mail, slogans printed on theater curtains, and so on. See also discussion of public texts like street signs in Simon Franklin, "Reading the Streets: Encounters with the Public Graphosphere, c. 1700–1950," in *Reading Russia: A History of Reading in Modern Russia*, ed. Damiano Rebecchini and Raffaella Vassena, vol. 1 (Milan, 2020), 259–91.

[91] E. P. Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," *Past & Present*, no. 38 (1967): 56–97.

[92] *Russkie krest'iane* 3:111; Sarah Badcock, "Time Out from the Daily Grind," 695–98.

[93] See, for example, *Russkie krest'iane* 5.2:137–38, 5.4:391–406. See also ibid. 5.4:171, 7.2:523, 7.3:470, and 7.1:264.

[94] See, for example, ibid. 2.1:279, and 5.2:760.

[95] Ibid. 3:107–8.

[96] Ibid. 5.1:219.

after work. Rural Russians read after sundown or on days without agricultural work, like Sundays and holidays. Spatially, rural reading more often took place in homes, schools, and churches, using whatever gathering spaces were available in villages without taverns, trams, factories, or busy streets. But we find that, although moving along the rural/urban gradient meant lower-class Russians had to adapt their everyday habits, one of the habits they adapted was finding spaces and times to read together.

Reading interests

> Gorky's books are not allowed there [the public library], and can only be bought in stores for one ruble each; but in spite of this most workers know his books better than the old ones. There is not a factory where some worker cannot tell you a Gorky story. Perhaps he has not read it, but then some other man has told it to him.
>
> — Anonymous skilled mechanic to American journalist Ernest Poole, St. Petersburg, 1905.

So far we have addressed the social circumstances, spaces, and daily patterns through which poor people in urban and rural areas engaged with texts. Here we consider what lower-class Russians read and why, a topic explored in greater detail in the historical literature on late imperial popular culture.[97] Memoirs and ethnographic materials indicate that some lower-class readers had highly diverse and eclectic tastes. Aleksandr Ivanovich Senin, a teacher from Vytegorsk district, Olonets province, recalled the rich diversity of interests for public readings in his village: "I could not satisfy the tastes of all my listeners. One likes fiction, another—history and travels, a third—religious literature, only not the Gospels, but from the lives of the saints, where there are more wonders. Two of the young peasants relentlessly asked that I read from a book that talks about making *valenki* (there is a *valenki* industry here)." Senin's recollections remind us that lower-class listeners' tastes cannot be easily pigeonholed. His audience was a group of around one hundred peasants aged ten to seventy. Some were illiterate. He concluded that popular needs were better served by providing free access to libraries, so that people could select for themselves the materials that interested them.[98] A Saratov kopek paper's mission statement acknowledged the same dilemma: "Today's reader is a demanding person. One wants striking political color from the newspaper, another stunning sensations, a third serious political articles, a fourth … can we even speak about what the fourth wants."[99] Even within a single city or village, lower-class readers were noted for their eclectic interests.

Authors of memoirs, recalling poor childhoods in the late nineteenth century, emphasized their eagerness to read anything they could get their hands on, especially exciting material like adventure novels or travelogues.[100] Intelligentsia critics in the early twentieth century built on impressions like these to lament the low tastes of the mass reader. High culture like Turgenev or Pushkin, they thought, was beyond the readers of kopek papers and *lubok* prints, who would instead be drawn to cheap, trashy literature like the infamous "Pinkerton" detective stories.[101] Leftist critics were particularly incensed by the rise of the penny press and its sensational "boulevard" novels, which they felt distracted workers

[97] See, for instance, Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read*; idem, "Popular Philistinism"; and Reitblat, "Reading Audience."

[98] *Russkie krest'iane* 6:142–43.

[99] "Ot redaktsii," *Saratovskaia pochta*, August 6, 1913.

[100] A. Shapovalov, *Put' molodogo rabochego* (Moscow, 1923), 5–6; Nik. Verzhbitskii, *Zapiski starogo zhurnalista* (Moscow, 1961), 45.

[101] A. S. Izgoev, "Vospitanie demokratii," *Russkaia mysl'* 30:7 (1909): 206; An—skii, *Narod i kniga*, 7–16. On the educated response to popular culture see Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read*, 295–352. On the "Pinkerton craze" see Boris Dralyuk, *Western Crime Fiction Goes East: The Russian Pinkerton Craze, 1907–1934* (Leiden, 2012).

from their own labor press.[102] Even some kopek newspaper contributors claimed that readers were mainly interested in these novels.[103]

Lower-class readers themselves told a different story. Commenting on a 1911 report from a workers' library, *Moskovskaia gazeta-kopeika*'s founder noted that literature comprised over 60 percent of borrowed books: Tolstoy was in first place, followed by Turgenev, Dostoevsky, and Gorky. Virtually no readers were interested in detective fiction, a fact this journalist used to excoriate intelligentsia critics who thought that was all lower-class readers wanted.[104] In 1913 a *Gazeta-kopeika* journalist surveyed readers' literary tastes and reached similar conclusions. Of 2,317 responses, 643 identified Tolstoy as their favorite author, followed by Gogol, Dostoevsky, Turgenev, and other luminaries of Russian and world literature, including foreign authors like Byron and Shakespeare. Either no readers identified authors of detective fiction, or the numbers were so low that the journalist did not bother reporting them.[105] Of course, love for *belles lettres* among survey respondents must be qualified by selection bias. Results likely reflected those readers most interested in returning a literary survey, and readers may have been biased toward reporting a love for Tolstoy rather than boulevard fiction. Nonetheless, these surveys point to a high degree of diversity in lower-class reading tastes as well as a much greater level of interest in high culture than contemporary critics acknowledged. These impressions confirm Evgeny Dobrenko's assessments of tastes among worker readers in the mid 1920s.[106] Furthermore, similar patterns appear elsewhere, for instance among library patrons. The prison library in Aleksandrovsk prison, Irkutsk, had more than eight thousand volumes by 1917 and was frequented by the prison's large contingent of criminal inmates as well as its tiny cohort of political prisoners. Its most popular titles were Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Alexander Dumas.[107]

Interest in high culture was unsurprising given the cultural milieu and textual ecosystem in which lower-class readers lived. In rural spaces, lower-class people engaged with the classics of Russian literature, folk and fairy tales, and the "cheap" fiction described above. The short stories of Pushkin, Tolstoy, and Turgenev were all repeatedly mentioned, sometimes in *lubki* formats.[108] Nineteen village teachers in Poshekhonsk district of Yaroslavl reported their impressions of villagers' encounters with Pushkin in particular, and all remarked on the popularity of Pushkin's stories. Teacher 19, for example, noted that "all who read something from Pushkin's work said that it was well written. 'I think that no-one could write better,' said one of the readers to another." Many teachers also remarked that they could not meet the villagers' demands because they only had a small selection of Pushkin's books available in the village.[109] Lower-class Russians in urban and rural settings, as well as those who regularly traveled between the two, read a wide variety of texts and evidently had high levels of interest in classic literature.[110]

In rural ethnographic studies, correspondents reported enormous diversity of reading tastes and preferences. Children enjoyed folk tales and stories, and many accounts note adults gathering to "listen attentively" when groups of children read tales like "Tsar Saltan," Ivan the Fool, and Baba Yaga.[111] Multiple correspondents noted that peasants loved books with "scary" or "funny" content, like tales of

[102] See, for example, Svintsov, "Vse o tom zhe," *Novoe pechatnoe delo*, no. 8 (October 3, 1911): 2–3.

[103] Nikolai Karpov, *V literaturnom bolote: Vospominaniia 1907–1917* (Moscow, 2016), 116–17.

[104] V. Anzimirov, "Prosvetlenie (Chto chitaiut rabochie?)," *Moskovskaia gazeta-kopeika*, June 17, 1911, 1; V. Anzimirov, "'Sezon' (Mysli i fakty)," *Moskovskaia gazeta-kopeika*, August 14, 1911, 1-2.

[105] Vadim, "Dve knigi (Otvet na opros)," *Gazeta-kopeika*, August 22, 1913, 3.

[106] Evgeny Dobrenko, *The Making of the State Reader: Social and Aesthetic Contexts of the Reception of Soviet Literature* (Stanford, 1997), 46.

[107] Sarah Badcock, *A Prison Without Walls? Eastern Siberian Exile in the Last Years of Tsardom* (Oxford, 2016), 43–44.

[108] *Russkie krest'iane* 2.1:296–97, 5.2:762–63, 5.4:170, 7.2:246–48, 7.2:521.

[109] Ibid. 2.2:86–88.

[110] These findings confirm Brooks's conclusions in "Popular Philistinism," though our evidence suggests these preferences existed across a broader lower-class population than the "people's intelligentsia" Brooks discusses.

[111] See, for example, *Russkie krest'iane* 5.4:403–4.

fantasy or magic.[112] Several also pointed out the popularity of Russian historical topics.[113] "In general," one wrote, "tales about episodes and individuals from the past (beginning with Nicholas I) are regarded with special, and it is possible to say, greater interest than episodes from earlier history."[114] Two correspondents found that peasants enjoyed reading outside their own experience, as with one peasant's response to Alexander Dumas' novel *The Count of Monte Cristo*: "Now that's a good book! You read, and you can't put it down, it just gets better and better!"[115]

Religious literature was ubiquitous in rural settings. Most accounts note the enduring popularity of texts like the lives of the Saints, the Psalter, and in some communities the Bible, in Russian.[116] Correspondents almost invariably found that older people preferred religious texts for reading and listening, while younger people preferred secular literature.[117] Two correspondents from Cherepovets district, Novgorod province, noted that most of the religious books were printed in Church Slavonic, which elderly audiences understood and regarded as a "more godly" language.[118] Older villagers could be suspicious of secular literature. In Vologodsk district, Vologda province, Aristarkhov reported that "old people don't read stories at all, considering them a sinful business."[119] Some also found that women and girls preferred religious books over secular literature.[120] Interest in religious texts was great enough that even when correspondents reported less interest in reading, they could still note affinity for religious works. Stepan Fedotovich Stavoverov, a peasant from Griazovetsk district, Vologda province, suggested that in his community there was little interest in reading at all. In his telling, only religious texts attracted popular interest.[121]

Tenishev's ethnographic correspondents overwhelmingly reported some degree of engagement with newspapers, but it was not always comprehensive. The ethnographer Balov tells us that peasants were most interested in their newspaper's correspondence pages, especially if they featured locals or discussed sensational cases like murder, or unhappiness. News of the tsar's family was read with interest, but front-page articles and *feuilletons* went unread.[122] Others found that peasants only bought newspapers to use the paper for cigarettes or to play lottery games.[123] E. N. Kuznetsov provided a highly negative account of rural reading practices in Troitsko-Lebedskoe village, Pyshchugsk county, Vetluzhsk district, Kostroma province. He suggested that literacy levels were extremely low, that there was no interest in readings, and that when "simple folk" did listen they understood nothing.[124] This may reflect both a small survey and a remote location, including just one village located 760 *verst*s (811 km) from the nearest town. Troitsko-Lebedskoe does, however, serve as the exception that proves the rule: Kuznetsov's comments are so different from the countless stories of passionate collective reading in rural spaces that they highlight the value and interest accorded to reading elsewhere.

Interest in practical texts on topics including agriculture, cattle rearing, market gardening, and beekeeping was reported very unevenly. Some correspondents suggested that local peasants were "not

[112] Ibid. 3:581, 5.4:403–4.

[113] See, for example, ibid. 5.2:764, 5.2:88, and 7.3:470.

[114] Ibid. 2.1:297, 3:582, 5.4:404–5.

[115] Ibid. 7.2:522.

[116] See, for example, ibid. 5.4:169, and 5.4:402.

[117] Ibid. 2.1:296, 3:581, 5.1:194-95, 5.2:137, 5.2:762, 5.4:169, 5.4:403, 7.2:228–29, 7.2:243.

[118] Ibid. 7.2:243, 7.2:521. See also A. G. Kraevetskii, *Diskussii v pravoslavnoi Rossiiskoi tserkvi nachala XX veka: Pomestnyi sobor 1917–1918 gg. i predsobornoi period* (Moscow, 2011).

[119] *Russkie krest'iane* 5.1:194–95.

[120] Ibid. 5.2:762.

[121] Ibid. 5.2:253.

[122] Ibid. 2.1:300–301.

[123] Ibid. 7.1:356-358, 5.2:765.

[124] Ibid. 1:96–97.

at all interested" in learning from practical topics, and one said the peasants distrusted agricultural texts, which they called "lord's fiction" (*barskoe vydumkoi*).[125] Others reported strong interest in and demand for practical agricultural books but shortages of suitable literature at affordable prices. This was especially problematic because Russian climatic conditions and agricultural practices were so diverse. To be relevant, books needed to be locally produced and engage directly with local concerns and practices.[126] In Chupovets district, Novgorod province, a local teacher wrote books about agriculture that were apparently read with enthusiasm by the local peasant community, who, "on holidays, spent their whole day reading these books." The same peasants also expressed interest in *Sel'skii vestnik*'s coverage of agricultural topics like the harvest, sowing, cattle rearing, and gardening.[127] This suggests that the problem was not lack of interest in practical matters, but rather belief that only texts attuned to local circumstances were worthwhile.

Access to diverse texts only grew over time, especially in the freer publishing environment after 1905. By the early twentieth century, lower-class Russians could satisfy their interests in numerous ways, demonstrated here by considering newspaper subscriptions. In addition to newspapers, successful kopek publishers printed numerous journals, books, and supplementary materials which were sold individually or bundled with newspaper subscriptions. *Kopeika* alone had 130,000 subscribers in addition to over 100,000 daily street sales, and subscribers could be located anywhere across Russia or even abroad.[128] *Kopeika* advertised heavily in cities like Tiflis, Kiev, Saratov, and Baku, and advertisements always touted the wide variety of supplements available to subscribers.[129] At minimum, those 130,000 subscribers would have purchased the cheapest subscription level of four rubles annually or 45 kopeks monthly and received the weekly journal *Zhurnal-kopeika* with their daily newspaper. If they splurged for the most expensive subscription (eight rubles annually), they would receive "360 issues of *Gazeta-kopeika*, 52 issues of the illustrated journal *Zerkalo zhizni*, 52 issues of the comic journal *Balagur*, 12 books of the monthly literary journal with illustrations *Volna*, 2 large format artistically-executed pictures [… and] 52 issues of an Illustrated Reference Encyclopedia (containing over 1,700 pages)."[130] If one subscribed to *Kopeika*'s sister journal *Vsemirnaia panorama*, the most basic subscription included the collected works of Tolstoy in 52 volumes; more expensive subscriptions added Gogol, Lermontov, Pushkin, Derzhavin, Shevchenko, Lomonosov, and more.[131]

Such offerings, including diverse subjects and the Russian cultural canon, were not uncommon. If a subscriber paid 6 rubles annually for *Moskovskaia gazeta-kopeika*'s highest subscription level, they would also receive three weekly journals, dozens of art prints, portraits, and pictures, a calendar, and the subscriber's choice of 50 books from a selection of 100, including the works of Tolstoy, Pushkin, Lermontov, Mark Twain, Flaubert, and other literary giants; books on politics, history, religion, and education; practical books offering advice to help poor readers in both cities and villages; and biographies of Tolstoy, Belinskii, and others.[132] Subscribers could also add a discounted subscription to

[125] See, for example, ibid. 3:576–577, 5.2:764. On mistrust see ibid. 7.4:223–24. On the challenges of applying general agricultural knowledge to specific rural spaces see Yanni Kotsonis, *Making Peasants Backward: Agricultural Cooperatives and the Agrarian Question in Russia, 1861–1914* (Basingstoke, 1999); and Ilya V. Gerasimov, *Modernism and Public Reform in Late Imperial Russia: Rural Professionals and Self-Organization, 1905-30* (Basingstoke, 2009).

[126] *Russkie krest'iane* 2.1:297–98, 3:582, 5.1:197, 5.4:405.

[127] Ibid. 7.4:252.

[128] For example, see Skitalets, "Istinno-russkoe," *Gazeta-kopeika*, May 22, 1913, 3, in which *Kopeika* received a letter from a reader in Oregon, and Skitalets, "Iz kipy pisem," *Gazeta-kopeika*, March 26, 1916, 3, in which a *Kopeika* journalist describes receiving letters from every corner of the Russian Empire: "from Obdorsk and Ramany, Gomel' and Kutaisi, Shuia and Harbin." For subscriber numbers see RGIA, f. 1136, op. 1, d. 123, l. 8ob.; and "Nemnogo tsifr (K segodniashnei godovshchine)," *Gazeta-kopeika*, June 19, 1913, 1.

[129] See, for example, the advertisements in *Kur'er-kopeika*, December 8, 1912, 4; *Iuzhnaia kopeika*, November 6, 1913, 4; *Saratovskaia zhizn'*, December 22, 1913, 5; and *Kavkazskaia kopeika*, December 20, 1915, 1.

[130] Advertisement, *Gazeta-kopeika*, January 1, 1914, 4.

[131] Advertisement, *Saratovskaia zhizn'*, January 12, 1915, 4.

[132] Advertisement, *Trudovaia kopeika*, December 7, 1909, 4. For an example of the type of works of popular science and history included in these offers see Vl. Maistrakh, ed., *Istoriia cheloveka, religii i vozniknoveniia voin: Prilozhenie k gazete "Trudovaia Kopeika"* (Moscow, 1915).

Derevenskaia gazeta, a newspaper intended to illuminate the world "from the point of view of village interests," with particular attention paid to agricultural education.[133] Texts aimed at lower-class readers offered information and analysis about the world and were often tailored to their interests, like the locally produced agricultural knowledge found in *Derevenskaia gazeta* or the writing of the teacher from Chupovets district. But such publishing efforts also aspired to bring lower-class readers into the world of high culture by promoting and disseminating the canon of Russian and world literature to millions of readers, subscribers, and collective listeners across the empire.[134]

Despite their reputation for loving boulevard novels, urban lower-class newspaper readers usually claimed greater interest in social questions than sensational fiction.[135] Politics was often high on readers' priorities. As one worker put it addressing *Moskovskaia gazeta-kopeika*, he rejected an upstart rival, *Utrenniaia gazeta-kopeika*, because it promised not to be involved in politics. "For workers," this reader concluded, "such newspapers are only for wrapping tea."[136] Observers of all stripes noted similar interests in social issues. An—skii found that factory workers were interested in *lubok* literature and religious texts, but also in "that which is close to their lives and concerns them."[137] Both leftist critics and tsarist police officials also thought workers were attracted to kopek papers for their coverage of workers' personal and professional lives.[138] In the countryside, surveys of peasant readers found particularly intense interest in current affairs during times of strife and conflict, like the revolutions and wars of the early twentieth century.[139] Diverse reading tastes meant interest not only in religious texts, exciting stories, or classic literature, but also practical economics, politics, and history. When lower-class Russians gathered in homes, workplaces, and social spaces to read together, their reading material varied widely based on group interests and needs.

CONCLUSION

In cities, towns, and villages across the late Russian Empire, lower-class people were surrounded by texts and reading. Not everyone was literate, but nearly everyone knew someone who was. To access the world of texts, illiterate and less-literate people relied on their more literate relatives, friends, neighbors, and colleagues to read aloud in homes, workplaces, and social spaces. The evidence we present here, drawn principally from newspapers and ethnographic surveys, indicates that collective reading was ubiquitous in late imperial Russia. Reading was not a solitary activity pursued by individual literate people. It was a shared activity pursued by countless informal reading groups, relying on shared subscriptions and purchases, loans from institutional collections, or texts passed on by prior readers. Reading groups and practices of group reading dramatically extended the reach of the written word, ensuring that despite relatively low figures for literacy or text circulation, social behaviors and daily habits meant lower-class Russians accessed texts anyway.

Listeners to collective readings actively and consciously engaged with the texts they read. Readings often concluded with wide-ranging discussions about the text and its place in their world. Readers knew they were listening to an authored work rather than an oral narrative, which let them situate

[133] Advertisement, *Trudovaia kopeika*, November 16, 1909, 4.

[134] See, for comparison, the St. Petersburg publishing house Posrednik, founded on Tolstoy's initiative, which published cheap editions of Russian literature for a mass audience (Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read*, 337–40). See also Jeffrey Brooks, "Chekhov, Tolstoy and the Illustrated Press in the 1890s," *Cultural and Social History* 7:2 (2010): 213–32.

[135] See, for example, "Po povodu napadok na 'Od. Pochtu,'" *Odesskaia pochta*, November 20, 1912, 4; "Po povodu napadok na 'Od. Pochtu,'" *Odesskaia pochta*, November 23, 1912, 4; and "Muzh'ia i zheny: Pochemu bol'shinstvo brakov neudachno?," *Ezhednevnaia gazeta*-kopeika, September 5, 1916, 4.

[136] F. Murav'ev, "Pis'mo v redaktsiiu," *Moskovskaia gazeta-kopeika*, June 30, 1909, 4. The article in question was the editorial in *Utrenniaia gazeta-kopeika*, June 27, 1909, 1.

[137] An—skii, *Narod i kniga*, 88.

[138] RGIA, f. 776, op. 9, d. 1370, ll. 40–41; Kvadrat, "Deshevaia gazeta i kinematograf," *Pechatnoe delo*, no. 11 (September 30, 1909): 2–6.

[139] Murinov, "Gazete v derevne," 179; Stepnoi, "Chto chitaet derevenskoe naselenie," 27–28.

it within a broader category of texts that they had read, listened to, or heard about, and facilitated discussion whereby the group as a whole discerned the text's value. We can identify differences between urban Russians reading newspapers together for daily news and politics, families reading stories together for collective entertainment or religious texts for moral instruction, or peasants reading practical agricultural texts and choosing to accept or reject them based on their relevance to local conditions. But we should recognize that all these examples, which recurred numerous times across time and space, had in common lower-class Russians gathering together to read, discuss, analyze, contextualize, and synthesize diverse texts. Collective reading could be engaged and critical reading. It was a sign of engagement and critical thought among lower-class Russians regardless of their location, interests, or levels of education and literacy.

We can make some distinctions among lower-class readers. Urban readers seem to have been more likely to express interest in politics and news, while rural readers seem to have been more interested in religion and practical instruction, with shared interests in entertainment, literature, and education. But these are differences of degree rather than kind, and may also be inflected by the constraints of our sources: the Tenishev material, collected at the turn of the century, reflected a different political and printing climate to the cheap urban newspapers of the post-1905 era. What evidence we do have of rural reading interests and practices after 1905 indicates a greater degree of shared interests than Tenishev's ethnographers could have seen years earlier, for instance in peasants' expressed interests in high politics and war news during the First World War. We see rural and urban spaces as intermeshing spaces. Rural and urban people tailored reading to their own daily rhythms, but found time and texts to read together all the same.

There were generational and gendered divisions among lower-class readers. More men were literate than women and far more youths were literate than older people. Previous studies have found correspondingly higher levels of reading among youths and lower levels of reading among women, somewhat mitigated by literate women having higher per-capita levels of reading than literate men.[140] Our evidence supports these findings, while adding the dimension that those readers could in turn facilitate listening for numerous others. Reading tastes also differed by cohort, with younger people more interested in exciting stories and older people and women more interested in religious texts, but these were tendencies rather than rules. Like the rural/urban divide, differences in reading habits and interests across demographic groups were gradients, not strict boundaries.

Reading and engagement with texts was not limited to a small stratum of educated, literate people in late imperial Russia, whether traditional elites, the intelligentsia, the emerging middle classes, or skilled urban workers. Lower-class Russians valued the written word and engaged with it on a regular basis, listening in large and small groups before discussing what they heard and its relevance to their lives. Literacy was sufficiently widespread and texts sufficiently circulating to allow for extensive engagement with the textual world. Regardless of education or literacy, collective reading and social practices made the written word a regular part of daily life. Lower-class Russians—workers, peasants, and poor people from all walks of life—engaged critically and thoughtfully with the textual sphere, meeting it on their own terms and thereby also engaging meaningfully with Russia's expanding social and political spheres.

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[140] Borodkin and Chugunov, "The Reading Culture of Russian Workers," 155–56.

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