ABSTRACT

MAKING TEA RUSSIAN:
THE SAMOVAR AND RUSSIAN NATIONAL IDENTITY, 1832-1901

by Audra Jo Yoder

Over the course of the nineteenth century, tea was transformed from an aristocratic luxury to an everyday household commodity in Russia. Concurrently, the samovar (a metallic vessel of obscure origin, used to heat water for tea) rose to prominence as an everyday household item and a potent symbol of Russian identity. Since neither tea nor the samovar are Russian in origin, the “Russianness” of tea drinking can be analyzed as an “invented tradition” linked to Russia’s developing national identity. This thesis argues that the great writers and artists of the nineteenth century were largely responsible for establishing tea and the samovar as Russian before either were affordable for the majority of Russia’s population. By the advent of the twentieth century, the samovar had become so deeply ensconced in Russian myth and memory that Soviet and post-Soviet Russians believe it to be an obligatory fixture of “old” Russian culture.
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Introduction

In June 1971, *Soviet Life* magazine ran a two-page spread under the heading: “Russian Tea: A Tradition Three Centuries Old.” The article featured glossy black-and-white photos of smiling people gathered around samovars, and the text boasted:

Muscovites have long been tea drinking connoisseurs. They were the first Russians to taste the beverage. This was in 1638, when an ambassador brought Czar Alexei Mikhailovich 130 pounds of tea from Mongolia. The czar sent the Mongolian khan a hundred sableskins as a token of his gratitude.1

The article goes on to praise Muscovites for their time-honored tea traditions, and lauds the first Russians who attempted to grow the leaf in their native soil. In highlighting the tradition of Russian tea-drinking for their American audience, the producers of *Soviet Life* no doubt wished to convey a sense of social and cultural continuity stretching from the seventeenth century to the twentieth, exemplified by the cozy ritual of drinking tea. In this they may have succeeded, but unfortunately the authors got their history wrong.

This is what really happened in 1638: the Tsar’s ambassadors from Moscow, Vasili Starkov and Stepan Neverev, were trying desperately to make the best of the somewhat chilly reception given them by a Mongol Khan, who was displeased that several recent requests he had made of the Tsar had been disregarded. Starkov provides us with one of the earliest references to tea in the Russian sources, noting that he was served a beverage “consist[ing] of leaves, I know not whether from a tree, or a herb.”2 Starkov and Neverev had brought gifts for the Khan, but these were deemed unsatisfactory and to make up for this deficiency, the emissaries were stripped of virtually everything they carried (including their weapons) by the Khan and his attendants. When they finally managed to take their leave, the Khan presented gifts intended for the Tsar, which included fine damask of various colors, 200 sables, two beavers, two snow leopards, and 200 packets of tea. Despite their already strained relations with the Khan, Starkov made so bold as to refuse the tea, saying it was “unknown” and “superfluous” in Russia, and requesting that the Khan give the equivalent in sables.3 Not surprisingly, his protest went

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2 John F. Baddeley, *Russia, Mongolia, China, being some record of the relations between them* […], vol. 1 (New York: Burt Franklin, 1919), 118.
3 Ibid., 118-19. I have found no reference to the gift the Tsar supposedly sent in return.
unheeded, and the envoys carried the “superfluous” tea back to the court at Moscow. So much for the joyous reception of tea among Muscovites.

Contrary to the mythic Soviet Life article, in 1971 Russians had only been enjoying tea as an everyday popular beverage for one century. Only in the 1870s was it true that, in the words of a contemporary author, “throughout Russia, particularly in trading towns, not a single man spends a day without drinking tea twice, sometimes three times; and in the countryside those who are better off have come to use the samovar!” Tea did not become available or affordable to the vast majority of Russia’s population until the late nineteenth century, but so quickly and thoroughly was the drink incorporated into Russian social and cultural life that even today most Russians believe their tea traditions, along with the samovar, are far older. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, tea drinking as an everyday social ritual, if it existed at all, was confined to the highest echelons of Russian society. Late in the reign of Catherine the Great (r. 1762-1796), roughly one million pounds of tea (consisting of loose and compressed “brick” tea) were imported into Russia each year. During this same period, Robert Smith estimates that if tea consumption was limited entirely to aristocratic families, only about 1 pound of leaf tea and ¼ pound of sugar were available in Russia per person per year. Drinking tea, then, was a very expensive habit: in the 1780s, a Japanese sailor in Russia recorded that tea cost between 1 and 5 rubles per pound. The scarcity and high cost of tea limited its consumption to a small fraction of the Russian elite, who even then often used it only for medicinal purposes.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, this situation began to change as tea imports rose steadily and its use spread to wider segments of the population. In the last fifteen years of

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4 Quoted in R. E. F. Smith and David Christian, Bread and salt: a social and economic history of food and drink in Russia (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 241. To date, their chapter entitled “Tea and Temperance” remains the only systematic study in English on the history of tea in Russia. I am indebted to this work for the majority of my data on the economic history of tea.

5 Ibid., 234. For the sake of comparison, in 1786 the British consumed around 12.5 million pounds of tea. See Jane Pettigrew, A Social History of Tea (London: The National Trust, 2001), 40.

6 By contrast, one English family of six consumed about 100 pounds of sugar in 1797—about 17 pounds per person. See Sidney W. Mintz, Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History (New York: Viking Penguin, 1985), 116.

7 Smith and Christian, 234. In 1764, the price of tea in St. Petersburg was recorded as 1.462 rubles per pound of Ceylon tea, and 0.749 for “regular” (presumably compressed brick) tea. The lower price suggests that this tea may have reached Petersburg from Western Europe, rather than having come overland from China via Moscow. See Musya Glants and Joyce Toomre, eds. Food in Russian History and Culture (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 38.
the nineteenth century, the price of tea in Russia fell by half. In 1901, the same year the Trans-Siberian railway became active, 115 million pounds of tea entered Russia, and only then did the average annual tea consumption reach one pound per person. Yet one pound per person per year was still not much: if an individual were to drink only one cup of tea per day, a supply of one pound would run out in about three months. Even so, as Barbara Engel has found, by World War I tea with sugar had become such a staple, even in the villages, that violent protests took place when sugar and sugar substitutes such as fruit drops were scarce. That Engel places protests over a lack of sugar for workers’ tea into the category of “subsistence riots” demonstrates how deeply tea had penetrated into Russian culinary culture by the early twentieth century. Thus by 1917, the transformation of tea from rare luxury to household necessity was complete. Yet the economic history of tea in Russia, measured in rubles or in pounds imported per year, does not explain how the beverage became so firmly ensconced in the popular consciousness that the producers of Soviet Life could be convinced—or at least try to convince their readers—that the distinctive phenomenon known as “Russian tea” (chaepitie) dated back three centuries. Throughout, I will use the Russian term chaepitie (literally “tea drinking”) to refer to the behaviors, terminology, beliefs and material objects associated with tea that were peculiar to Russia.

The aim of this study is to trace the development of chaepitie in Russian culture over the course of the nineteenth century, and to explore how and why tea and the samovar came to be perceived as symbols of Russian identity. While the history of tea in Russia has ramifications for that country’s economic, social, political and diplomatic history, due to limitations of space and scope this thesis limits its inquiry to the role of cultural elites in the invention of Russian tea traditions. And making tea into a distinctively Russian beverage was in fact a cultural process, wherein writers, artists and other well-known cultural figures strove to articulate the meaning of “Russianness” for popular audiences. Russia’s greatest national poet, Aleksandr Pushkin

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9 Smith and Christian, 236.
10 Dix, 24. Dix also notes that in 1900 annual tea consumption in Great Britain was seven times that amount.
11 Or 96 days, to be precise. This calculation is based on the general rule of thumb that it takes one teaspoon of loose tea to make one 8-oz. cup. A thrifty Russian household might stretch their tea further by using less and steeping the leaves more than once.
(1799-1837), was possibly the first to associate the samovar with Russian identity; hence the beginning date for this study has been set at 1832, when Pushkin published the last chapter of his magnificent “novel in verse,” Evgenii Onegin. Beginning with Pushkin, nineteenth-century cultural elites connected tea and the samovar with Russian identity long before the vast majority of Russia’s population could afford to drink tea regularly in their homes, much less own a samovar, and their works seem to be largely responsible for installing tea next to vodka and kvas as a Russian “national drink.”¹³ In a recent article, Oleg Nikolaev writes that Russia received and adapted both Eastern and Western tea ways, with the result that she developed her own “national method” of drinking tea (“[Rossiia]...sodalsia svoi, natsional’nyi sposob chaepitiia”).¹⁴ The goal of this study is to discern how and why this came about, and to explore the process by which the distinctively Russian practices of chaepitie and chainichat’ (to pass time by drinking tea) were “invented” in the nineteenth century. This thesis ends its investigation in 1901, when average annual tea consumption in Russia reached one pound per person. Although this statistic does not mean that tea had become a habitual beverage for the entire population of the Empire, by this date tea was considered an everyday household commodity, and the samovar had become firmly ensconced in the minds of many Russians as a symbol of their national identity.¹⁵

Newly Russified tea traditions, epitomized by the samovar, were integrated into popular culture during a time when cultural elites were wrestling with the meaning of Russian national identity. In the eighteenth century, following the example of Peter the Great, the Russian aristocracy had spent vast amounts of time and money imitating European aristocratic culture.

¹³ On tea as a Russian national drink, see Elena Hellberg-Hirn, Soil and Soul: The Symbolic World of Russianness (Aldershot, England: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 1998), 158. Maurice Baring, by contrast, posits tea and kvas, rather than tea and vodka, as the two Russian national drinks; see Maurice Baring, The Russian People (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1911), 58. Graham Dix also insists that kvas, rather than tea, was “clearly the national beverage,” yet concedes that “The samovar and tea-drinking are associated with what is quintessentially Russian in the popular view” (21). Finally, in his 1965 study of Soviet tea cultivation (quoted below), Robert M. Bone opens by referring to tea as “the national beverage of the Soviet peoples” (“Soviet Tea Cultivation,” in Annals of the Association of American Geographers 53, no. 2 [June 1963], 161).


¹⁵ Here a few words on national symbols are in order. Michael E. Geisler writes, “A symbol reduces the enormous complexity of communication using a concrete sign as a kind of shorthand for…a complex of interrelated concepts, ideals, and value systems” (“Introduction: What are National Symbols—and What Do They Do to Us?” in National Symbols, Fractured Identities: Contesting the National Narrative, Middlebury, Vermont: Middlebury College Press, 2005 p. xxvii.) National symbols help unite the members of a national community, who may be separated across formidable geographic and socio-economic distances. This “feeling of suspending one’s individuality in the collective whole is one of the most powerful psychological effects of the semiotics of national symbols” (Geisler xxvi). Members of national communities can point to symbols such as language, dress, social customs, visual images—and most importantly for our purposes, the samovar—as signifiers of national identity.
When the French, whose language had become the native tongue of most aristocrats, became the enemy in the War of 1812, Napoleon’s invasion “triggered an unprecedented outburst of popular patriotism within the Russian empire.”16 In the nineteenth century, partially in response to the Patriotic War (*Otechestvennaia Voïna*), educated Russians’ obsession with Europe began to give way to attempts to articulate and celebrate Russia’s cultural uniqueness.

To this end, writers, artists and other cultural figures drew on established “national” values and principles, but also helped create new traditions and rituals that had not previously existed. During this period, drinking tea around the samovar, a practice virtually unknown even in the late eighteenth century, came to be seen by many as a quintessentially Russian pastime. As early as 1837, when only a small minority of Russia’s population could consider tea an everyday household commodity, the *Zhurnal obshepoleznykh svedenii* reported that tea had become “necessary in Russia, almost like air.”17 To use Eric Hobsbawm’s words, inventing the tradition of Russian tea drinking was “essentially a process of formalization and ritualization” of practices imported from outside, and it was only by “imposing repetition” that the inventors of Russian tea culture tied this relatively new tradition to Russia’s developing national identity.18 This “invented tradition” was so successful that in the turbulent years following the 1917 Revolution, the samovar served as a powerful, emotionally charged symbol of old Russian culture.

The history of the samovar—both as an item of material culture and a symbol of Russian identity—serves as something of a microcosm for the development of Russian national consciousness. In the debates over Russian national identity, I follow Simon Franklin and Emma Widdis, who hold that Russianness is not “a ‘thing’ to be located, described, and explained,” but

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17 Quoted in Alison Smith, *Recipes for Russia: Food and Nationhood under the Tsars* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2008), 95.
“a field of cultural discourse.” Sometime between 1800 and 1900, Russians had come to view drinking tea around the samovar as a ritual uniquely their own, and had developed a plethora of distinctive aphorisms, phrases, practices, habits and beliefs surrounding it.

One important means by which this process took place was the propagation of visual images which portrayed the samovar as a prominent fixture of Russian space. Historically, Russian culture has relied heavily on visual sources for information about reality and about their own identity. Valerie Kivelson and Joan Neuberger have pointed out the “conspicuous predisposition, across most of the thousand years [of Russian culture]…for Russians to turn to

19 Simon Franklin and Emma Widdis, eds. National Identity in Russian Culture: an Introduction (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), xii. Franklin and Widdis continue: “[I]dentity is each person’s perception of themselves: as an individual, in relation to a group or groups, and by contrast with other individuals and groups. Russian identity is and has been a topic of continual argument, of conflicting claims, competing images, contradictory criteria. And that is the point….There is no separate ‘reality’ behind the cultural expressions of identity.”

While Hobsbawm’s concept of “invented tradition” is entirely appropriate and very useful in examining the development of Russian tea culture, in studying Russian national identity more generally, I favor Anthony D. Smith’s ethnosymbolic model, wherein he rejects Hobsbawm’s idea of invented traditions along with his theory of nationhood. I have argued elsewhere that it is indeed possible to reconcile the two to the extent that examining invented traditions using the ethnosymbolic model becomes possible and even fruitful. As Geoffrey Hosking has observed, “It is possible to accept that nations as we know them are products of the modern era, and yet to assert that, in a simpler and cruder form, an ethnic or proto-national awareness straddling different social strata existed much earlier in history” (Geoffrey Hosking, Russia: People and Empire [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997], xxii-xxiii).

Smith’s ethnosymbolic approach arises partly out of a critique of social constructionism, and “seeks to link modern nations and nationalism with earlier collective cultural identities and sentiments” (A.D. Smith, 62-63). One of the principal advantages of this viewpoint over that of Benedict Anderson and other social constructionists is that it fully appreciates the emotional depth and commitment of people who make great sacrifices for the nations they identify with. Conceiving of all human communities as “imagined” gives the impression of trivializing the passion with which people defend them. Moreover, examining the development of nations such as Russia over the longue durée both lends them the credibility of longevity and affirms the historical roots of invented traditions. Ideological nationalism and the nation-state are still conceded to be modern, novel developments, but the ethnosymbolic model restores to them their deep roots in the past (even though nationalism may skew and manipulate this past in the service of its ideological agenda). Recurrence and continuity are emphasized, although the particular forms and expressions of human communities are understood to change dramatically over time. When I write of nations and nationalism in this thesis, I have Smith’s definitions in mind. Smith understands the nation to be “a named human population occupying a historic territory or homeland and sharing common myths and memories; a mass, public culture; a singly economy; and common rights and duties for all members.” Smith’s definition of nationalism is “an ideological movement for the attainment and maintenance of autonomy, unity, and identity on behalf of a population deemed by some of its members to constitute an actual or potential ‘nation’” (A.D. Smith, 3). See Anthony D. Smith, The Nation in History: Historiographical Debates about Ethnicity and Nationalism (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2000).

All this is not to say I reject Benedict Anderson’s generally accepted concept of nations as “imagined communities”; I simply prefer to round out this more “modernist” approach with a more organic and long-term understanding of nationhood, which better suits the Russian situation. Franklin and Widdis point out that “[i]mplicitly or explicitly, questions of national identity permeate Russian cultural self-expression, from the very first native literary and artistic endeavors of the ‘Rus’...to the intensified self-questioning in the ‘new’ Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991” (National Identity in Russian Culture, xi), and my aim here is to expand our understanding of Russian national identity by elucidating the place of tea and the samovar in it.
the visual in order to summon a new reality into being.”20 What Kivelson and Neuberger call “seeing into being” was most evident in the Christian iconography with which Russia had been saturated since medieval times. Icon painters made no attempt at lifelike representation; rather, they prayerfully created images to serve as windows into a heavenly, transcendent reality. To be sure, nineteenth-century Russians did not look at modern paintings in the same way their medieval forbears had gazed on sacred icons; all the same, “[t]he recurrent and powerfully effective idea that it is possible to depict what exists just out of reach, just out of sight, was a central feature of Orthodox and Soviet iconography.”21 At the risk of overgeneralization, what many have called the “iconic” nature of Russian art outlasted the cultural supremacy of Orthodox Christianity. Nineteenth century painters and photographers labored to produce images that somehow captured the essence of Russian life, and as will become evident later, the samovar soon became a ubiquitous fixture in images created for the purpose of revealing what Russian life was truly like—or what it should or should not be like.

To cite one typical example, in an 1889 oil painting entitled Za Chaikom (At Tea), Mikhail Klodt depicted a young woman drinking tea with a samovar. In the early 1870s, Klodt was involved in founding the group of artists sometimes rendered in English as the Wanderers (Peredvizhniki) who were known for their national and realistic representations of Russian life. The second part of this paper will demonstrate how Klodt and his fellow Peredvizhniki played an important role in establishing the samovar as a national symbol. In this painting, every detail—the lamp burning in front of the icons in the corner, the lubok (popular print) on the wall, the hand-embroidered fabrics—positively exudes Russianness. Klodt portrays the samovar as just another object typically found in a traditional Russian home. Similarly, samovars are often present among the objects of peasant material culture in Russian outdoor museums. By depicting the samovar in scenes meant to capture and celebrate various aspects of Russian daily life, Klodt and other visual artists further reinforced the idea of its Russianness. In this way, the samovar-as-symbol was “seen into being.”

21 Ibid.
Given the crucial role of literature in Russian culture, poetry, novels, short stories and plays can also be analyzed in search of clues to the nature of the national identity Russians created for themselves in the nineteenth century. Literary artists, perhaps more than others, “bore a special responsibility to find the meaning of national identity.”

David Bethea writes:

Any national literature is to some significant extent a mirror held up to its people’s collective countenance….It is, in a real sense, generative of new meaning, and thus capable of shaping that countenance in the future….For the society that takes its literary products seriously, the text of a novel or poem can be a kind of genetic code for predicting, not concrete outcomes or actual progeny, but something no less pregnant with future action: the forms of a culture’s historical imagination….Few societies have been more dependent on their literature for overall meaning…than the Russia of the modern period (1800 to the present).

The Russian tendency to treat literary artists as prophets is well-established. Pushkin’s poem Prorok (Prophet, 1826) was an important text in articulating the Russian tradition of writers’ role as prophets “responsible for shaping the spiritual and moral destiny of the nation.”

As the literary critic Vissarion Belinskii put it in a letter to the writer Nikolai Gogol in 1847: “The titles of poet and writer have long since eclipsed the trumpery of epaulettes and fancy uniforms in Russia.”

Beginning with Pushkin, the great Russian literary artists of the nineteenth century—Nikolai Gogol, Fedor Dostoevskii, Lev Tolstoi, and Anton Chekhov—helped virtually institutionalize the rituals, traditions and taboos surrounding tea drinking, thereby making them distinctively Russian. Although the writers and artists whose works are examined here held widely varying views on the nature of Russian culture, each played a role in fixing the samovar in the Russian historical imagination as a national symbol. By the advent of the twentieth century, these writers—with the possible exception of Chekhov—comprised the canon of “classical” Russian literature.

Russian works of fiction, especially the great ones, continue to shape popular perceptions of Russia’s history and culture. French theorist Pierre Nora has pointed out that “memory has

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never known more than two forms of legitimacy: historical and literary,”26 and this was true of Russian culture in the nineteenth century. In the words of Sigurd Shmidt, “For most people, throughout their lives, great works of fiction and art supply the basic sources of the specific historical information that they retain in their minds, especially on the events and people of distant ages and on the everyday life of those times.”27 Writers such as Pushkin, Dostoevskii and Tolstoi are held in such high esteem that their works are unconsciously assumed to be the very embodiment of historical verisimilitude; although they depicted chaepitie more or less accurately (though sometimes anachronistically) in their works, contemporaries and later readers tended to project Russian tea traditions further back into the past than historical investigation will allow (hence the Soviet Life article). Shmidt continues: “Any fictional work with a historical theme is an indicator of the level of historical knowledge in the age when it was created—the knowledge possessed by its authors and by the public for which it was intended.”28 The presence of samovar symbolism in works like War and Peace, as we shall see below, led readers to assume that chaepitie was older and more pervasive in Russia than it actually was. To borrow again from Shmidt, “What a writer, especially a great one, says may acquire the significance of an assessment that is actually historiographical in nature.”29 In the words of Vladimir Kabanov:

To be sure, fiction is least of all a literature of historical fact. That said, fiction is able to show as no other source can the cast of mind of people in various generations and various social strata, their social reference points and ideals, their views of personal happiness, moral and material values, the nature of relationships among different people, interactive and behavioral styles, and so on. Literature affords us the opportunity to know how people dressed and what they ate and drank. Knowing that, one may, in turn, speculate on the most diverse aspects of human life.30

Kabanov is certainly right in his consideration of literature as documentation of the past; yet as historical sources, both literature and visual art can also be valued for the ways in which they mislead their audience. As will become evident below, the treatment of the samovar in Russian literature and art did not always reflect historical fact accurately. Nevertheless, what follows will demonstrate how the Russianness of the samovar became a cultural reality.

28 Ibid., 20.
29 Ibid., 22. This is true, for example, of Pushkin’s opinion of Karamzin.
30 Quoted in Shmidt, 24.
I. The samovar becomes Russian: Pushkin and Gogol

Aleksandr Pushkin travelled illegally to the Caucasus in 1829. A few years later, he revised his travel diary and published it as *A Journey to Arzrum* (1835). In this dense little volume, Pushkin describes the people he encountered in the South, and particularly the Circassians, in terms that clearly indicated his perception of them as violent, uncivilized, and above all, profoundly other. “The dagger and the sword are parts of their body,” he wrote, “and an infant begins to master them before he can prattle. For them killing is a simple bodily motion.”31 Clearly, the Circassians stood in urgent need of civilizing, and Pushkin expressed his hope that these wild people would be “tamed” by the Russian annexation of the Black Sea region. Toward this end, Pushkin recommended the importation of the samovar, and, he was quick to add, Christianity: “The influence of luxury may favor their taming: the samovar would be an important innovation. There is, however, a stronger means, one more moral, more in keeping with the enlightenment of our time: the preaching of the Gospel.”32 Here Pushkin reveals two types of influences he believed capable of bringing Russianness (which he equated with civilization) to these elusive and violent Muslims: the cultural, symbolized by the samovar, and the “moral,” represented by Orthodox Christianity. Pushkin’s use of the samovar as a symbol of Russian civilization is striking, given that samovars were not manufactured in Russia much earlier than the 1770s.33 During Pushkin’s lifetime (1799-1837) the consumption of tea was largely restricted to the court and the aristocracy, and so the samovar for Pushkin is a symbol of the Europeanized refinement of the Russian ruling elites. Neither tea nor the samovar are Russian in origin, and the latter had come to Russia quite recently, yet already by the 1830s Pushkin considered the samovar to be a symbol of a culture and civilization that were distinctively and natively Russian. Considered Russia’s first and greatest national poet, Pushkin’s endorsement of the samovar could be of no little consequence for its future in that country.

32 Ibid., 24. The original reads: “Vliianie roskoshi mozhet blagopriiatstvovat’ ikh ukroshcheniiu: samovar byl by vazhnym novovvedeniem. Est’ sredstvo bolee sil’noe, bolee nравственнее, bolee soobraznoe s prosveshcheniem nashego veika: propovedanie Evangeliia” (Pushkin, *Izbrannye Proizvedeniia v dvuh tomanakh*, vol. 2 [Moskva: Izdatel’stvo “Khudozhestvennaia Literatura,” 1965], 491-92). Pushkin’s thoughts on various means of “taming” the Circassians of the Black Sea region affords a fascinating example of the concepts of empire and national identity dovetailing. The role of tea in Russian history and culture is a topic wherein theories of nationalism and empire meet, and this intersection is ripe for further study.
33 Smith and Christian, 240.
The samovar, it seems, originally arrived in Russia as an object of Western European fashion and opulence. The mystery of the samovar’s origin has prompted Russians to invent and perpetuate myths about its appearance in Russia; although samovars certainly existed in Western Europe and North America before they appeared in Russia, one souvenir book on samovars confidently states: “No one knows where a samovar appeared for the first time, but one thing is clear, that it’s a purely Russian invention. The true fame to the samovar [sic] was created by Tula masters.” Conversely, there is a legend that Peter the Great carried the first samovar to Russia from Holland. Later, Catherine the Great may have promoted its manufacture, partly in imitation of the European vogue for decorative bronze, and in her own words, because of “the insufficient development of this art [of bronze-working] in Russia.” It may not be a coincidence that Catherine created the Imperial Bronze Factory in 1778, the same year the very first samovar workshop opened in Tula, the town which subsequently became famous for its samovar factories.

In praising such a late introduction into Russia, then, Pushkin exemplifies the Europhilia of the Russian elites during his lifetime, yet paradoxically, before Pushkin there was no Russian national literature. Stephanie Sandler writes that even today Pushkin “stands as a towering emblem of Russian culture, as more than just a monument: the example of his life and work is perceived as giving meaning to the nation’s identity….Pushkin lives as if outside of time, and contemplating him offers the possibility of reacquiring a soul, itself a timeless notion of identity and spirit.” Pushkin’s works are full of rich descriptions of the everyday habit of tea drinking among the Russian upper classes, and his writings were among the first to establish the ritual of chaepitie in the Russian national consciousness. In Pushkin’s works, tea accompanied interminable female conversations and, as in England, the preparation of the samovar was customarily supervised by the hostess herself, who personally poured tea for her guests.

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35 Hellberg-Hirn, 159. Hellberg-Hirn does not cite the source of the theory that Peter I brought the first samovar to Russia from Holland. However, it seems remotely possible, given Peter’s predilection for the latest European gadgets, and the fact that tea urns first began to appear in Holland in the early eighteenth century (see Smith and Christian, 242).
36 Nathalie Bondil, ed., Catherine the Great: Art for Empire (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 2005), 122. Natalia Anatol’evna Solodkova, Senior Research Fellow at the Novgorod State United Museum, told me that Catherine explicitly promoted samovar manufacture in Russia, and this seems likely although I have yet to find direct evidence to support it.
37 Orlando Figes, Natasha’s Dance: A Cultural History of Russia (New York: Picador, 2002), 49.
Moreover, the rhythm of a typical day was measured by meals, which even by Pushkin’s time (at least for the aristocracy) included afternoon tea:

I love to define
Time by dinner, tea, and supper.

Liubliu ia chas
Opredeliat’ obedom, chaem
I uzhinom. 39

Another passage from Pushkin’s Evgenii Onegin (1823-30) helped to establish evening tea as virtually obligatory:

’Twas growing dark; upon the table, shining,
there hisses the evening samovar,
 warming the Chinese teapot;
light vapor undulated under it.
Poured out by Olga’s hand,
into the cups, in a dark stream,
the fragrant tea already ran,
and a footboy served the cream. 40

Smerkalos’; na stole, blistaia,
Shipel vechernii samovar;
Kitaiskii chainik nagrevaia;
Pod nim klubilsia legkii par;
Razliyi Ol’ginoi rukoiu,
Po hashkam temnoi strueiu
Uzhe dushisty chai bezhal,
I slivki mal’chik podaval… 41

Readers of this famous “novel in verse” thus absorbed the samovar as an accessory of the elegant Russian home. Joyce Toomre, who edited the English edition of Elena Molokhovets’ A Gift to Young Housewives (discussed below), remarks, “The preparation of the samovar and the sound of its hissing became as culturally laden in Russian literature as the teakettle whistling on the hob in English literature.” 42 Compare Pushkin’s stanza above with these lines from Cowper:

Now stir the fire, and close the shutters fast,
Let fall the curtains, wheel the sofa round,
And, while the bubbling and loud-hissing urn
Throws up a steamy column, and the cups,

41 Pushkin, Evgenii Onegin, 64.
That cheer but not inebriate, wait on each,
So let us welcome peaceful evening in.\textsuperscript{43}

In the world of Pushkin’s characters, tea was an everyday habit, and the sea over which conversation rolled. Since the use of what Europeans called the tea urn soon fell out of fashion, samovars did in fact become almost exclusive to the Russian Empire, and this only deepened Russians’ conviction that the samovar had been uniquely theirs from time immemorial.

In his 1844 article “Evgenii Onegin: An Encyclopedia of Russian Life,” the influential critic Vissarion Belinskii referred to the work as Russia’s “first national masterpiece.” Belinskii asserts that Evgenii Onegin is a historical work:

First of all, Onegin is a poetically rendered picture of Russian society captured at one of the most interesting stages in its development. From this standpoint Evgenii Onegin is a historical poem in the full sense of the word, although there is not a single historical personage among its heroes. The historical merit of this poem is all the greater, because it was the first attempt of its kind—and what is more a brilliant one—to be undertaken in Russia.\textsuperscript{44}

Belinskii (1811-48) is acknowledged as Russia’s greatest literary critic and exerted “a moral influence extending far into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.”\textsuperscript{45} He is well-known for his belief that a work of art should flow organically from “life,” and he praised Pushkin’s works for having achieved this.\textsuperscript{46} Thus in the opinion of one of the most influential literary critics of the nineteenth century, Pushkin’s works accurately reflected Russian social life during his lifetime, and this life included the samovar.

Perhaps the strongest evidence that Pushkin helped initiate the invention of Russian tea traditions is found in his short but important novel The Captain’s Daughter (1836). This work, along with Nikolai Gogol’s Taras Bulba, would eventually enter the high school curriculum and “comprise the cultural legacy of the average educated Russian.”\textsuperscript{47} Set in the 1770s, The Captain’s Daughter is a fictional story that takes place during the Pugachev Rebellion, a peasant uprising.

\textsuperscript{45} Richard Freeborn, Furious Vissarion: Belinskii’s Struggle for Literature, Love and Ideas (Leics, England: School of Slavonic and East European Studies, 2003), 1.
\textsuperscript{46} Victor Terras, Belinskij and Russian Literary Criticism: The Heritage of Organic Aesthetics (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1974), 149.
\textsuperscript{47} Dan Ungurianu, Plotting History: The Russian Historical Novel in the Imperial Age (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2007), 4.
in southeastern part of the Empire led by the Cossack Emelian Pugachev. The author of Pushkin’s fictional memoir, Petr Grinev, owns a traveling chest in which he keeps his teacups, teapot, plates and other accoutrements. Grinev drinks tea daily, and refers to his tea ware as “tokens of the pampered life I had enjoyed at home.” At the inn where Grinev meets Pugachev for the first time without recognizing him, the innkeeper serves tea from a samovar to Grinev and his mysterious guide (Pugachev). For the officers and other upper-class characters in the novel, tea is an everyday habit and the samovar a common sight in homes and inns. Moreover, for Grinev the samovar represents the comforts of home and family. In a chapter Pushkin omitted from the final version of The Captain’s Daughter, Grinev recalls:

In the evening we all gathered in the drawing room, around the samovar, and began talking merrily of the dangers we had escaped. Maria Ivanovna [the captain’s daughter] was pouring out the tea; I sat down beside her and from then on paid no attention to anyone else. My parents appeared glad to see the tenderness between us. That evening still lives in my memory. I was happy, entirely happy—and how many such moments are there in our poor human lives?

Although Pushkin did not publish this passage during his lifetime, it was the only chapter he saved from his first draft of the novel. As such, it was valued by later critics, especially for its vivid description of the later stages of the Pugachev rebellion. Scenes similar to this one, describing intimate family gatherings around the samovar, would become common in Russian literature as the nineteenth century progressed.

However, if Robert Smith’s findings are accurate, the samovar seems to have been virtually unknown in Russia before the 1770s, when the action of the novel takes place; the first known Tula samovar workshop did not open until 1778, four years after the Pugachev rebellion ended. Thus Pushkin’s use of the samovar in The Captain’s Daughter is anachronistic, projecting samovar use further back into the Russian past than seems historically plausible. Yet The Captain’s Daughter was hailed by nineteenth-century critics as accurately representing the habits and attitudes of people who lived through the Pugachev rebellion. In an essay entitled “The Development of the Idea of Nationality in our Literature since the Death of Pushkin,” published in Dostoevskii’s journal Time in 1862, the critic A.A. Grigoriev lauded Pushkin for having achieved “the most astonishing identity with the attitudes of previous generations” in The

49 Ibid., 113.
50 Editor’s note, ibid., p. 105.
Moreover, since Belinskii and other important nineteenth-century writers considered Pushkin “a unique manifestation of the Russian spirit,” as Gogol put it, and *The Captain’s Daughter* proved much more popular and widely-read than his historical work on the Pugachev Rebellion, readers of *The Captain’s Daughter* and other works of Pushkin’s could easily have presumed that the samovar had been a distinctive fixture of upper-class Russian homes even before the 1770s. The novel certainly set a precedent for subsequent Russian literature: as the writer Ivan Turgenev remarked, “[W]e have inherited from Pushkin’s works a whole host of modes and types...which were to be fully realized in the literature that was to follow. Remember, for example, the tavern scene from *Boris Gudunov* or *The Chronicle of Goriukhino*, or take such figures as Pimen, or the main characters of *The Captain’s Daughter*—can they not be seen as proof that the past lived in him as vividly as the present or as his instincts about the future?”

Pushkin’s fellow nineteenth-century writers took his writings to be paradigmatic of Russian history and culture, and followed his example (consciously or unconsciously) in taking the Russianness of tea drinking and the samovar for granted in their works.

Pushkin’s writings provide fascinating tidbits about the tea habits of the upper crust, while Nikolai Gogol’s, appearing somewhat later, describe how country landowners and even ordinary people were exposed to tea and samovars. Born in Ukraine, but spending about half his life in Russia, Gogol (1809-52) wrestled with the complex question of his own national affiliation, but later came to accept his “hyphenated identity.” Gogol’s first major work, a collection of stories entitled *Evenings on a Farm near Dikanka* (1831-32) was fairly well-received, but in the words of one contemporary critic, was valuable mainly as folklore. The tales follow the amusing adventures of Ukrainian peasants, and despite the presence of vivid passages describing in detail the goods for sale at rural fairs, nowhere does Gogol mention tea or

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52 Nikolai Gogol, “A Few Words on Pushkin,” in *Russian Views of Pushkin*, 1. Dostoevskii would quote these words of Gogol’s in his famous speech on Pushkin in 1880.
54 Ivan Turgenev, “Pushkin,” in *Russian Views of Pushkin*, 68.
56 Paul Debreczeny, “Nikolay Gogol and His Contemporary Critics,” *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 56, no. 3 (1966), 5. The critic was F.V. Bulgarin, editor of the *Northern Bee*. 
samovars. The lack of references to tea in this folkloric and thoroughly Ukrainian book is quite natural as Ukrainian peasants, like their Russian counterparts, had little or no access to tea in this period. By contrast, Gogol’s last great work *Dead Souls* (1842), which in Belinskii’s opinion, “wrested Gogol from the province of Ukrainian culture and made him Russian genuinely, unequivocally, and irrevocably,” includes samovars in some very important texts for the development of Russian national identity.\(^{57}\) Although he felt the ambiguity of his own identity throughout his life, Gogol’s writings were subsequently included in the canon of great nineteenth-century Russian literature.

*Dead Souls* documents the Russian lower classes’ exposure to tea and samovars. In early nineteenth century provincial towns it was common for street vendors to sell hot drinks in the marketplace, including tea and the more traditional *sbiten’* (a hot drink made from herbs and honey) out of a samovar or *sbitennik* (a portable, samovar-like vessel with a spout instead of a tap). Tea and *sbiten’* were also drunk in taverns and inns. The narrator of *Dead Souls* describes “a man who sold hot spiced honey drinks next to a red copper samovar, so that from a distance one might think that there were two samovars in the window, were it not that one of the samovars had a beard as black as pitch.”\(^{58}\) The passage is much better in Russian: “*V ugol’noi iz etikh lavochek, ili, luchshe, v okne, pomeshchalsia sbitenshchik s samovarom iz krasnoi medi i litsom tak zhe krasnym, chto na okne stoialo dva samovara, esli b odin samovar ne byl s chernoiu kak smol’ borodoiu.*”\(^{59}\) Several times in *Dead Souls*, Gogol elaborates at length on public rooms which he claims were familiar to every traveller, noting that “the merchants repaired there on market day to drink their customary two cups of tea; there was the same grimy ceiling, the same grimy chandelier...the same oil paintings covered the whole of the wall, in short, everything was the same as everywhere else.”\(^{60}\) By Gogol’s time, samovars for tea or *sbiten’* were a relatively common sight in taverns, inns and marketplaces, but high cost limited samovar ownership to landowners and prosperous merchants. In the first half of the nineteenth century, peasants and others on the lower end of the social spectrum would have been aware of

\(^{57}\) Ibid., 246.
\(^{60}\) Gogol, *Dead Souls*, 19.
the presence of tea and samovars in public venues, and may have drunk tea occasionally, but on the whole could not afford to consume it privately in their homes. Gogol portrays the agent of a certain estate visited by Chichikov as typical in his aspirations to refinement: “Having become an agent, he quite naturally did as all agents do: kept company and made friends with the better-off villagers, levied higher taxes on the poorer families, got up at nine o’clock in the morning, waited for the samovar, and drank tea.”

Later in the novel, Gogol includes the samovar in passages that later became key texts on Russian national identity. Although *Dead Souls* was reviewed unfavorably by the conservative press, Slavophiles seized on the work and helped establish it for posterity as a “national novel.” In a famous passage worth quoting at length, Gogol vividly describes typical countryside scenes, and ends with a passionate address to Russia herself:

…[O]nce more they were on the highroad. And once more at either side of the highroad there was a quick succession of milestones, station-masters, wells, strings of village-carts, drab villages with samovars, peasant women, and a brisk bearded innkeeper running out of his yard carrying oats, a tramp in worn bast-shoes who had trudged over five hundred miles...the tops of pine-trees in the mist, the peal of church bells fading away in the distance...Russia! Russia! [Rus’! Rus’?] I see you, from my wondrous beautiful afar: I see you now. Everything in you is poor, straggling, and uncomfortable: no bold wonders of nature crowned with ever bolder wonders of art...What are those sounds that caress me so poignantly, that go straight to my soul and twine about my heart? Russia! What do you want of me? What is that mysterious, hidden bond between us? Why do you look at me like that? And why does everything in you turn eyes full of expectation on me? ...oh, what a glittering, wondrous infinity of space the world knows nothing of! Russia!

Gogol here portrays the samovar as a fixture of the Russian landscape, just as endemic as church bells, pine trees and infinite spaces. In his book on landscape and national identity in Imperial Russia, Christopher Ely traces the attempt to discover the unique beauty of the Russian land. This project was fraught with conflict, because European Russia was topographically monotonous and dotted with filthy villages in which poverty and injustice were all too apparent. Over the course of the nineteenth century, however, writers and artists began to see flat European Russia as a space with great spirit and potential. In relation to the passage cited above, Ely writes:

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61 Ibid., 43.
62 Bojanowska, 240. The “Slavophiles” were an ideological camp in mid-nineteenth century Russia who advocated a return to traditional Russian ways of life and thought, while their opponents the “Westernizers” desired to remake Russia in the image of the West (cf. Peter the Great).
63 Ibid., 232-33.
With this passage Gogol managed to turn the tables on the picturesque, simultaneously diminishing the authority of a Europe-based aesthetic and cementing the vision of vast open space as a fundamental trope of Russia’s national self-image. Boundless space becomes a symbol of Russia’s supposed heroic past, and it also suggests inevitable future greatness. In short, Gogol turns the very emptiness of Russian landscape to account as the promise of a temporarily obscured yet ever-present national superiority.  

Gogol includes the samovar in a pastiche of scenes he considered typical of the Russian countryside—peasants in bast shoes, bread, pine trees, black soil, church bells—thus imbuing all these things, together with the samovar, with national particularity and meaning.

Toward the end of *Dead Souls*, the samovar appears once more in an important passage concerning Russian national identity. Again Gogol highlights what could be interpreted as a negative feature of Russian life (a blizzard), but gives the image a positive spin by endowing it with spiritual nobility.

There is a severe frost of thirty degrees below zero in the streets; the fiend of the north, the witch of a blizzard, is howling outside...but through the whirling snow-flakes a light gleams invitingly from some window on the fourth floor; in a cosy little room lit by modest stearine candles, to the singing of the samovar, a conversation that warms the heart and the soul is carried on, a bright page of some inspired Russian poet is being read, of a poet whom God has bestowed on Russia as a heavenly gift, and the youthful heart throbs ardently and loftily as it never does even under southern skies.

The elements of this scene illustrate Gogol’s conception of Russia’s unique identity: the room is humble and small, but warm and intimate; by heating water for hours on end, the samovar facilitates uninterrupted conversation; a poet’s message is recognized as God-given and special to Russia; and the passion of a youthful heart, aroused by literature, burns brighter than is possible elsewhere. Again in this passage, Gogol cemented readers’ understanding of the samovar as an important feature of Russian space. Here and elsewhere in nineteenth century literature, the role of the samovar is to foster community and conversation by providing a long-lasting supply of warmth and caffeine. Some contemporary critics had censured Gogol for his

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65 Gogol, *Dead Souls*, 270.
“indecency” because of his unashamed portrayal of the more dirty and crude side of Russian life, but later in the century, the realism characteristic of Dead Souls would come to dominate the “national” literary and artistic style.67

Gogol, Pushkin and others helped to launch the career of the samovar in Russian literature while tea was still comparatively scarce in Russia. As the nineteenth century progressed, cozy domestic scenes featuring the samovar became more and more common in Russian fiction while the beverage itself became cheaper and more abundant. Fiction and social commentary were also becoming cheaper and more abundant as Russia developed a larger market for popular literature. The reign of Nicholas I (1825-1855) was also a time when the search for Russia’s national identity was intensifying with the revival of popular interest in old Russian culture. The publication of Petr Chaadaev’s first “philosophical letter” in 1836 helped spark the so-called “Slavophile-Westernizer” debate, in which artists and intellectuals posited competing ideologies of Russian national identity. What Billington calls the “unofficial debate over Russia’s destiny” signaled the rejection by some of the Western influences that had pervaded Russian culture since the time of Peter the Great.68 For many, returning to the ways of “old” Russian culture seemed just as impossible as making Russia into a real European nation. Modern Russia had somehow to find its own special destiny, and writers and visual artists were perceived as prophets in this endeavor; thus the samovar had made its literary debut during a period of intense cultural striving toward the discovery what was unique and good about Russia and her people. As great social change accompanied intellectual controversy beginning with the emancipation of the serfs by Alexander I in 1861, conditions were ripe for the invention of tradition, and chaepitie developed rapidly into a celebrated national pastime.

II. The flowering of an invented tradition

Demand for tea in Western Europe had developed earlier and more quickly than in Russia partially as a result of the lower costs involved in transporting it by sea. In the mid-nineteenth century, the Russians were still procuring what little tea they consumed directly from the Chinese

67 See Debreczeny, 33.
68 Billington, 315.
via the slow and expensive overland caravan route. All the same, by the 1850s Russian tea imports had reached 10.8 million pounds, and accounted for 95% of the value of goods imported overland from China.\textsuperscript{69} The decade of the 1860s would be the beginning of the end of the overland tea trade between China and Russia, yet in a way that led to even greater increases in Russian tea consumption. Around this time, the British realized they could sell tea to the Russians at much lower prices than the latter were paying for their caravan tea. High tea prices in Russia were due mainly to the much higher overhead costs, which involved transporting a heavy (and perishable if improperly packed) cargo over 4,000 miles of desert, mountains, and steppe, and paying import duties and commission fees that were perpetually in favor of the Chinese.\textsuperscript{70} “Moreover, the cost within China of transporting tea to Kyakhta [the trading post on the Russo-Chinese border] was in some cases eight times greater than the cost of taking it to the nearest port.”\textsuperscript{71}

Russian merchants soon caught on to the idea of procuring tea more cheaply by sea, though the government was still anxious to protect the caravan trade.\textsuperscript{72} Permission for tea to be brought to Russia by sea from Canton was granted only in 1862, and regular sailings between Vladivostok and Odessa did not begin until 1880, but the “Canton” tea’s ascent to prominence in Russia was extremely rapid.\textsuperscript{73} At the 1866 Nizhnii Novgorod fair, 75% of the tea sold by the wholesalers was Canton tea.\textsuperscript{74} Smith believes this “cheaper sea-borne tea, both Russian and West European, was probably the main factor in encouraging the drinking of tea in Russia on a mass scale.”\textsuperscript{75} Whatever its origin, the rapidly increasing availability of tea, along with its dropping price, allowed that beverage to gradually become a viable alternative to alcoholic drinks by the end of the nineteenth century. Patricia Herlihy describes tearooms as an important tool of the

\textsuperscript{69} Smith and Christian, 235.
\textsuperscript{71} Smith and Christian, 235.
\textsuperscript{72} Ending the monopoly on tea procured through the trading post of Kiakhta on the Russo-Chinese border would mean the loss of China as a market for Russian manufactured goods (Fitzpatrick, 54).
\textsuperscript{73} Smith and Christian, 236.
\textsuperscript{74} Fitzpatrick, 54.
\textsuperscript{75} Smith and Christian, 236. The tea coming from Canton was shipped via London. This tea, different in taste and probably inferior in quality, together with the completion of the Trans-Siberian railway, spelled doom for the caravan tea imported via Kiakhta.
temperance societies that proliferated in Russia during this period.  

It was also in the late nineteenth century that, as Smith and Christian have pointed out, “For tea” (na chai or na chaek) replaced “For vodka” as the customary way of asking for a tip. Smith and Christian have pointed out, “For tea” (na chai or na chaek) replaced “For vodka” as the customary way of asking for a tip. Tolstoi’s works also evince tea’s viability as a temperance drink in Russia: in “Master and Man” (1895), the peasant Nikita “was gloomy because he passionately longed for some vodka, and the only thing that could assuage that longing was tea and he had not yet been offered any.”

As the popularity of tea gradually spread from the wealthier classes to wider and wider segments of the population between 1850 and 1900, Russians developed a rich folklore surrounding its preparation and consumption, and especially concerning the samovar. During this period, the literary dimension of Russian tea culture expanded and an understanding of tea as a “national drink” seeped into visual and linguistic culture. Although many Russians still could not afford to own a samovar or to drink tea daily in their homes, literary works of that era followed the precedent established by Pushkin and Gogol in making the samovar appear to be an obligatory fixture of Russian domesticity. A wide variety of aphorisms and colloquial phrases concerning tea also entered the Russian language around this time. Visual artists and photographers did their part to establish the samovar as a status symbol in the countryside, as it was still rare for lower-class people to own one, and installed tea, and to a lesser extent the samovar, in the nation’s image of what all Russian households should contain. Nevertheless, the increasing abundance of tea and samovars in Russia was not uncontroversial: the samovar was perceived by some as a sinful and worldly luxury, and the relationship of tea with the Orthodox Church and its proponents remained somewhat uneasy. What is certain is that by the end of the nineteenth century, Russian tea culture was well-established and very rich, and all the more extraordinary for its rapid development during such a short period.

77 Smith and Christian, 237.
Tea and samovar imagery in the literature of the second half of the nineteenth century

Although Fedor Dostoevskii, Lev Tolstoi, and Anton Chekhov held widely divergent ideologies concerning Russia’s identity and future path, each of them repeatedly used the ritual of tea drinking, embodied in the samovar, as a symbol of Russian culture. Colloquialisms concerning tea abound in their works: an out-of-shape Captain beats a hasty retreat, “puffing like a samovar”79 (pykhtia kak samovar);80 a countess is nicknamed “the little samovar” because she is always “getting heated and boiling over about something”81 (Samovarom on nazyval znamenituui grafiniu Lidiiu Ivanovnu za to, chto ona vsegda i obo vsem volnovalas’ i goriachilas’);82 a peasant quips that samovars, “like everything in this world,”83 eventually go out.84 Because of the normative nature of literature in their culture, Russians understood such works to be both descriptive of the reality of Russian life, and as models for appropriate behavior.

For Fedor Dostoevskii (1821-1881), tea drinking was no longer restricted to the upper classes, and the samovar symbolized familial intimacy and belonging. Belinskii was largely responsible for launching Dostoevskii’s career, having been shown the manuscript of Poor Folk by the poet Nikolai Nekrasov. When the novel was published in 1846, Dostoevskii became a literary sensation virtually overnight. Although Belinskii would soon become disenchanted with the social message (or lack thereof) in Dostoevskii’s subsequent works, by the end of his life Dostoevskii was one of Russia’s most famous living writers. A character in Poor Folk expresses her loneliness at boarding school, and her longing for home as embodied in the family samovar:

I would find myself remembering even the most trivial objects in the house with affection. I would think and think: how good it would be to be at home right now! I would sit in our little room, by the samovar, together with my own folk; it would be so warm, so good, so familiar. How tightly, how warmly I would embrace Mother, I would think. I would think and think, and quietly start to cry from heartbreak, choking back the tears, and forgetting all my vocabulary.85

81 Lev Tolstoi, Anna Karenina; the Maude Translation; Backgrounds and Sources; Essays in Criticism, trans. Louise and Alymer Maude (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1970), 98.
82 Lev Tolstoi, Anna Karenina: Roman v vos’mi chastiakh, in L.N. Tolstoi: Sobranie Sochinenie, volume 8 (Moskva: Gosudarstvennoe Izdatel'stvo Khudozhestvennoi Literatury, 1963), 129.
83 Dostoevskii, The Devils, 268.
84 “Kak i vse v mire.” Dostoevskii, Besy, 207.
In another passage, Razumikhin (*Crime and Punishment*, 1866) describes his conception of marital bliss and what he calls the “feather-bed principle”:

> It’s a process of induction; it means the end of the world, an anchor, a quiet haven, the hub of the universe, the try-ichthyic foundation of the earth, the essence of *blinis* [Russian crepes], of juicy *kulebiakis* [pies stuffed with meat or cabbage], of the evening samovar, of quiet lamentations and snug, fur-trimmed jackets, of warm stove-couches—yes, as if you had died, but were still alive, with the simultaneous advantages of both!\(^{86}\)

For Dostoevskii, the samovar embodied the warmth and life of a distinctively Russian world, and is occasionally found in passages together with that ultimate symbol of Russian homeyness, the great Russian stove. Few scenes could be more stereotypically (and nostalgically) Russian than the following passage from *Poor Folk*:

> In the morning I would rise as fresh as a daisy. I would look out of the window: the fields would be covered in frost; the delicate hoarfrost of autumn hung from the bare branches; there would be a thin covering of ice on the lake….The sun shone on everything with its brilliant rays, which would break the thin ice like glass. Everything was light, brilliant, happy! The fire would be crackling in the stove once more; we would all seat ourselves close to the samovar….A *muzhik* would ride by on his best horse, on his way into the woods to gather firewood. Everyone was so pleased, so happy!\(^{87}\)

In this passage, reminiscent of Gogol’s enraptured paean to Russia in *Dead Souls*, Dostoevskii includes the samovar in a group of familiar Russian symbols, including snow, *muzhiks* (peasants), horse-drawn sleighs, and wood. The samovar is a central symbol of family closeness and idyllic childhood in Dostoevskii’s fiction, and particularly in *Poor Folk*; to share tea is to share life and human affection. In these passages Dostoevskii creates a pastiche of Russian national symbols, and implies that the samovar is just as authentically Russian as snow, wood and peasants.

Dostoevskii repeatedly writes that people can get used to just about any kind of suffering and degradation—except, evidently, a lack of tea. Even the protagonist from *Notes from Underground* (1864) proclaims, “I say let the world fall to pieces so long as I can continue to drink tea” (*Ia skazhu, chto svetu provalit’ sia, a chtob mne chai vsegda pit’*).\(^{88}\) In the epilogue to *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov becomes indifferent to life, to Sonya, even to the news of his mother’s death; he accepts his fate without question. Sonya writes home “[t]hat as to the

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\(^{87}\) *Poor Folk*, 97.

food, he was more or less indifferent to it, but that this food, except on Sundays and feast days, was so abominable that in the end he had gladly accepted a small sum of money from her in order to be able to brew tea for himself each day; but that as far as everything else was concerned he had asked her not to trouble herself.”

Even the most destitute of Dostoevskii’s characters drink tea, and consider its absence among the lowest forms of economic and social degradation imaginable. To lack tea (especially when an unexpected guest arrives, as we shall see below) is to be without one of the most fundamental lubricants of social interaction. “You know, my darling,” Makar Alekseyevich (Poor Folk) writes to his dear Varvara, “it is rather embarrassing not to be able to afford to drink tea….Varenka, one drinks tea for the sake of others, for form’s sake, in order to keep up appearances”

An even more serious social faux pas than not being able to afford tea, however, is to serve it in a “dirty and improper” way, which is shameful to the ladies

In The Idiot (1869), Aglaia asks the prince whether he is capable of drinking a cup of tea properly in polite company as part of her effort to discern whether he is worthy of marrying her. Similarly, Dostoevskii’s characters are often mortified at being caught without a samovar by an unexpected guest. In The Devils (1872), Shatov’s wife comes back to him after a long estrangement, and in a panic of excitement, he leaves her alone and sprints straight to his friend Kirilov’s for a samovar.

In The Brothers Karamazov (1881), Dostoevskii’s last and arguably greatest novel, chaepitie takes on something of a different flavor than his earlier works. Throughout the novel, drinking tea still signifies domestic communion, but here chaepitie as peaceful family ritual is conspicuous by its absence. Only once do any two members of the Karamazov family have tea together: Ivan shares a glass with Alesha as he relates his Grand Inquisitor story. Before their

89 Crime and Punishment, 620.
90 Poor Folk, 7.
92 Crime and Punishment, 264.
93 Dostoevskii, Prestuplenie i nakazanie, in F.M. Dostoevskii: Polnoe Cobranie Cochinennii v Tridtsati Tomakh, volume 6, 164.
95 The Devils, 566-67.
momentous conversation Ivan, on seeing Alesha, invites him to eat supper before having tea, adding: “You don’t live by tea alone, I suppose”96 (Ne chaem zhe ved’ ty odnim zhivesh’). At other times, characters order tea but fail to drink it, or rush through their tea in anticipation of a certain important event—as when Fedor Pavlovich gulps his tea down as quickly as possible on the night before his death, expecting Grushenka to arrive at any moment.98 Tea and samovars appear at other critical junctures in the novel: Maria Kondratevna discovers Smerdyakov hanging on a nail when she enters his room to clear away the samovar.99 On the night of his conversation with the devil, Ivan orders a samovar and prepares tea but does not drink it; later he flings a glass at his imagined visitor in frustration.100 Elsewhere, drinking tea is a sign of inappropriate opulence. Dimitrii keeps three samovars boiling all night long during his “spree” in Mokroe;101 after Father Zosima’s death, his enemies condemn him for indulging in tea and debate the lawfulness of its consumption by monks.102 That the disruption of family life can be signified by a lack of normal tea-drinking habits is indicative of how thoroughly the rhythm of chaepitie had been incorporated into everyday life by Dostoevskii’s time.

The absence of familial tea drinking in The Brothers Karamazov is offset by the Elder Zosima’s association of tea with reconciliation. Eight years after his life-changing encounter with his servant Afansii, when Zosima had struck him and then repented of it, Zosima (now a monk) chances to meet Afansii in a marketplace. The poor man invites the monk into his home: “His room was poor, but clean, joyful. He sat me down, lit the samovar, sent for his wife, as if my appearance was somehow a festive occasion.” The two men share tea as equals, and Zosima reflects: “I was his master, and he was my servant, and now, as we kissed each other lovingly and in spiritual tenderness, a great human communion took place between us. I have given it much thought, and now I reason thus: Is it so far beyond reach of the mind that this great and openhearted communion might in due time take place everywhere among our Russian

97 F.M. Dostoevskii, Brat’ia Karamazovy, in Polnoe Cobranie Cochinenii, volume 14, p. 208. Ivan’s joke echoes Christ’s words in Matthew 4:4, “Ne khlebom odnym budet zhit’ chelovek...”
98 Dostoevskii, The Brothers Karamazov, 261.
99 Ibid., 617-618.
100 Ibid., 601, 616.
101 Ibid., 408.
102 Ibid., 312.
people?” In this passage, sharing a samovar-full of tea is an accessory to reconciliation across socioeconomic boundaries. Later, Zosima recounts having spoken to his compatriots about recognizing and respecting the humanity of servants:

I began while still in my officer’s uniform, after my duel, to speak about servants at social gatherings, and everyone, I remember, kept marveling at me: “What?” they said, “shall we sit our servants on the sofa and offer them tea?” “Why not,” I would say, “at least once in a while?” Then everyone laughed. Their question was frivolous, and my answer vague, yet I think there was some truth in it.  

Here serving tea is a manifestation of the social and spiritual equality Zosima would advocate throughout his life from this point forward, and a sign of the reconciliation that is one of the most important themes in *The Brothers Karamazov*.  

Dostoevskii’s characters take tea in homes, bars, restaurants, hotels, train stations, parks, and posting-stations; tea is drunk over cards and billiards, at funerals and parties, and at the beginning and end of every day. In Dostoevskii’s fiction, drinking tea is part of everyday life, and so omnipresent as to be almost invisible. By the time he was composing his great novels in the 1860s, Russian tea etiquette had acquired what Hobsbawm calls “the sanction of perpetuity,” particularly in the pages of Russian novelists.

Because of his rejection of the Orthodox Church and his cynicism toward Russian culture, some critics consider Lev Tolstoi to be Dostoevskii’s fundamental opposite. Despite the ideological chasm between them, Tolstoi also uses tea- and samovar-related imagery to great effect in his writings. With the publication of his very first work of fiction, *Childhood, Boyhood, and Youth* (1852) Tolstoi ushered in a new era of Russian literature. This work has been credited with influencing the aristocratic conception of Russian childhood for decades to come. In reference to Tolstoi’s *Childhood*, Andrew Wachtel writes:

In his overall conception, in his descriptions and interpretation of Irten’ev’s surroundings, of his parents, and if Irten’ev himself, Tolstoi invented a Russian gentry attitude toward childhood. In time, his personal myths of childhood became the foundation on which practically all future Russian works on the subject were constructed. In this sense he was not the historian of gentry childhood, but rather its creator, a poet first and foremost.

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104 Ibid., 318.
105 Hobsbawm, 2.
106 Bethea, 185.
By marking key scenes and transitions with samovars, Tolstoi also included tea and the samovar in popular conceptions of Russian childhood. In *Childhood, Boyhood, and Youth* the protagonist’s mother, whom he adores and idealizes, appears for the first time in the novel bent over the samovar: “Mother was sitting in the drawing room pouring tea. In one hand she held the teapot and with the other the tap of the samovar, from which the water was flowing over the top of the teapot onto the tray. But though she was looking intently she did not notice this, nor the fact that we had come in.”108 The narrator, Nikolenka Irten’ev, associates the samovar with his mother, who in her emotional agitation spills water from the samovar on the morning of her children’s departure for Moscow. Wachtel points out that Tolstoi’s emphasis on the bond between mother and son strongly influenced “the subsequent development of Russian accounts of childhood.”109 For Nikolenka, both his mother and the samovar are sources of seemingly endless warmth and comfort (similar to Dostoevskii’s close association between the samovar and family life). Later that same day, Nikolenka and his brother are delighted to find their parents have arranged an outdoor tea party during a hunting expedition. “At the sight of the cart we voiced uproarious joy, for to have tea on the grass in the woods, and generally where nobody had ever had tea before, was considered a treat.”110 Members of nonfictional aristocratic families also entertained fond memories of tea parties in the forest.111

A samovar also marks Nikolenka’s, and the novel’s, transition from childhood to boyhood. Nikolenka’s mother’s death takes place at the very end of *Childhood*, and the first two pages of *Boyhood* find Nikolenka describing the scene of another departure from the family’s country home: “The samovar is already on the boil in the passage, and Mitka, the postilion, is blowing into it, red as a lobster. Outside it is damp and misty, as though steam were rising from pungent manure. The bright cheerful rays of the sun light up the eastern part of the sky and the thatched roofs of the roomy sheds enclosing the yard, which sparkle with the dew that covers them.”112 Thus in Tolstoi’s *Childhood, Boyhood, and Youth*, which played such an important role

109 Wachtel, 49.
112 Ibid., 110.
in the “mythologizing” of Russian childhood, the samovar serves as a symbol of familial love, a
typical object found in the upper-class home, and helps mark transitions between different life
stages. Tolstoi’s works, like Dostoevskii’s, portray Russian life not only informationally,
providing descriptions of how people lived, but in such a way as to provide a model for how
people ought to live or conceptualize their lives. Although the two had widely divergent ideas
about what constitutes essential “Russianness,” for both the samovar symbolizes various modes
of human relationships.

On a grander scale, Tolstoi’s *War and Peace*, considered by many to be the best novel in
any language, is a paradigmatic example of the drive to understand and articulate Russian
national identity. Orlando Figes writes that works like *War and Peace* were “huge poetic
structures for symbolic contemplation, not unlike icons, laboratories in which to test ideas…they
were animated by a search for truth….In a way that was extraordinary, if not unique to Russia,
the country’s artistic energy was almost wholly given to the quest to grasp the idea of its
nationality.”

Throughout the novel, samovars repeatedly appear at crucial moments in the lives
of Tolstoi’s characters, and stand next to the very heart of what Tolstoi considers true
Russianness. The device does not appear often in the 1,400-page novel, yet is all the more
significant for its scarcity. Pierre’s first encounter with higher order masonry takes place against
the gentle hissing of a midnight samovar at a remote posting station. Much later, when Pierre
walks through a Moscow burned and ravaged by the French army, he encounters a family in the
street whose house is about to collapse in the flames. In a passage reminiscent of Gogol’s and
Dostoevskii’s compendia of Russian national symbols, the few items Tolstoi specifically
mentions that this family has chosen to save from the fire include those they value most: their
icons and the family samovar.

The very first mention of a samovar in *War and Peace* accompanies the first appearance
of Princess Liza (Lise) Bolkonskaya, who has been married the previous winter to Prince Andrei
Bolkonsky, and is pregnant with her first child. “Swaying slightly, the little princess tripped
round the table, her work-bag on her arm, and gaily arranging the folds of her gown seated

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113 Figes, xxvii.
115 Ibid., 1095.
herself on a sofa near the silver samovar, as if all that she was doing was a partie de plaisir for herself and everyone around her.”

Soon afterwards, Prince Andrei abandons the beautiful young princess to his family at their country estate, and leaves for the war against Napoleon. Their parting is acutely traumatic for the princess, and she dies in childbirth, the victim of her husband’s cruelty and selfish ambition.

By contrast, Sonya, a young, dowerless relation of the Rostovs, has an organic connection to the peasantry. Sonya inhabits a more authentically Russian world, and rather than fall victim to the sort of oppressive marriage Lise experienced, Sonya selflessly permits the man she loves to marry another. She remains single and pure to the end of the novel, uncorrupted by any desire for love and happiness. In this way, Sonya embodies the humble, pure, self-sacrificial Russia that was Tolstoi’s ideal. In a scene strongly reminiscent of that quoted above from the unpublished chapter of Pushkin’s The Captain’s Daughter, the very end of War and Peace finds all the main characters gathered for tea at Bald Hills, the Bolkonskys’ country estate: “All the adult members of the family were gathered about the round table at which Sonya presided [samovara, u kotorogo sidela Sonia] beside the samovar. The children with their tutors and governesses had had their tea and their voices could be heard in the next room. In the drawing-room everyone sat in his accustomed place…”

In this scene, the denouement of the novel, it is Sonya’s role to tend the samovar, patiently serving the elderly countess and the other family members, having learned to be content in a world where she alone is devoid of the satisfaction of marital love. This is the last appearance of both Sonya and samovars in the novel. Thus at the very beginning of War and Peace, Tolstoi presents Russian womanhood—or Mother Russia herself?—as enslaved to an ignorant and unjust masculine other (although Prince Andrei later bitterly regrets having abandoned his wife, and treasures her memory for the rest of his life). By the end, Sonya, the symbol of an ideal Mother Russia, presides graciously at the samovar, itself a potent symbol of a uniquely Russian type of hospitality and warmth.

While Dostoevskii and Tolstoi had published their fiction in “thick” journals that were widely circulated amongst the educated classes, Anton Chekhov (1860-1904) “was the first

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\[116\] Ibid., 9.
\[117\] Ibid., 1382-83.
major Russian writer to emerge from the penny press.”

Moreover, unlike the other literary giants discussed here, “Chekhov is remarkably free of the didacticism so prevalent in Russian literature before and after him (in this he is akin to Pushkin).” Chekhov wrote for a popular audience during a time when “the Russian reading public expanded and diversified in the wake of the Great Reforms, thus preparing the way for a broadly-based popular literature governed by market forces.” While a reading public had certainly existed in Russia more than a century before Chekhov’s time, the dynamic period at the end of the nineteenth century marked a significant overlap between two “previously self-contained circuits of literary distribution: the ‘cultured circuit’ and the popular circuit.” As a student in Moscow, and later as a doctor in its slums, Chekhov was well acquainted with, and wrote perspicaciously about, folk culture and street life.

Produced in widely-distributed, cheap editions, Chekhov’s writings exposed popular audiences to the already well-established folk culture surrounding tea. His short stories and plays are particularly interesting in their telling display of the wide range of social mores, superstitions and colloquialisms surrounding samovars, which although quite recent seem to have been well-established by Chekhov’s time. In a passage from The Name-Day Party, an annoying guest thinks he is impressing everyone with his clever impersonation of a merchant.

One young humorist sipped his tea through a lump of sugar and kept saying, “Sinner that I am, I love to spoil myself with the Chinese Herb.” Now and then he sighed deeply as he asked, “Please, just one more little dish-full.” He drank a lot, noisily crunched his sugar, thinking this was all very funny and original, and that he was giving a superb imitation of a merchant. No one appreciated that all these little things were sheer torture for the hostess…

Here, the “young humorist” acts on the assumption that tea habits could be indicative of social class. Elsewhere in Chekhov’s short stories and plays, a buzzing or humming sound (gud)
occasionally made by the samovar is considered an evil omen. A character in Ivanov (1887) states, “A man’s like a samovar, old boy. He doesn’t always stand on a cold shelf, there are times when he gets stoked up and starts fairly seething” (Chelevek, bratets ty moi, vse ravno chto samovar. Ne vse on stoit v kholodke na polke, no, vybaet, i ugol’ki v nego kladut: psh... psh...). Another man measures the depth of his poverty by the fact that he has been forced to sell his samovar and can offer his guests nothing but bread.

In Chekhov’s works, the rhythm of lighting the samovar and the duration of its boiling are also a way of measuring time. Samovars were not lit on fast days, and this “made the day seem very long.” Characters often say things like, “And now look what they’ve done. Two hours that samovar’s been on the table, and they’ve gone for a walk” (Vot it teper’. Samovar uzhe dva chasa na stole, a oni guliat’ poshli). Another reflects ruefully: “I knew that it would take a whole hour to prepare the samovar, and that my grandfather would be at least an hour drinking his tea, and afterwards would lie down and sleep for two or three hours, that a quarter of my day would be passed in waiting…” When samovars go out, Chekhov uses it to signify a great length of time, or as a sign of unseemly negligence.

Essentially, Chekhov’s works demonstrate how the samovar had become integrated into the national idiom. If Gogol, Pushkin, Dostoevskii, and Tolstoi had helped to establish the samovar as a national symbol, Chekhov’s works demonstrate that symbol’s versatility and everyday linguistic function. Unlike the other authors under consideration, Chekhov does not prescribe norms for samovar use and tea consumption, but rather describes how ordinary people drank their tea and quoted aphorisms about samovars on a daily basis. Toward the end of Chekhov’s life (he died in 1904), the rapidly growing Russian reading public was increasingly exposed to the classics produced earlier in the nineteenth century, which present samovars as an

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124 See, for example, “My Life,” “The Dependents,” “Three Years,” and “The Cherry Orchard.” In “The Cherry Orchard,” Firs states: “Pered neschast’em tozhe bylo: i sova krichala, i samovar gudel besperech’.” In “My Life,” Karpovna wails: “Samovar-to gudel poutru, gude-el! Okh, ne k dobru, serdechnye, ne k dobru.”


127 See “A Troublesome Visitor.”


130 Chekhov, Diadia Vania, in A.P. Chekhov: Sochineniia, volume 12, 66.

integral part of Russian life. Stephen Moeller-Sally writes that during this period, the intelligentsia aimed “to integrate the common people into mainstream educated culture through the creation of a national identity based not on political and religious institutions, but on a common cultural heritage defined by the established literary classics of the nineteenth century.”¹³² Pushkin’s Captain’s Daughter, as I have already mentioned, was incorporated into the high school curriculum and was read by millions.¹³³ By Chekhov’s time the average literate Russian, verifying from experience that tea really was an important part of Russian culture, could easily assume from reading The Captain’s Daughter that Russian tea traditions were as old as that work makes them appear.

As the above examination of Chekhov’s fiction and drama has shown, by the end of the nineteenth century the Russian language had acquired a wide variety of colloquialisms and phrases related to chaepitie. “V Tulu so svoim samovarom ne ezdiat” (No one goes to Tula with his samovar) is among the most well-known.¹³⁴ The old Russian word for hospitality was khleb-sol’ (literally bread-salt), and guests were customarily welcomed into homes with these two deeply symbolic foods.¹³⁵ As Smith and Christian have pointed out, khleb-sol’ not only represents essential elements of the early Russian diet, but also the two earliest types of economic activity undertaken in European Russia: farming and gathering.¹³⁶ In the twentieth century, Oleg Nikolaev goes so far as to claim that the phrase chai da sakhar (tea with sugar) came to rival the lexical and symbolic importance that khleb-sol’ held for earlier Russians.¹³⁷

A glance through Vladimir Dal’s Tolkovy Slovar’ Zhivogo Velikorusskago Iazyka (Explanatory Dictionary of the Living Great Russian Language) confirms the prevalence of tea-and samovar-related sayings in late nineteenth century Russia. Vladimir Dal’ (1801-1872) is the most famous of Russian lexicographers, and a great collector of Russian sayings. His Dictionary (published between 1863 and 1866, around the same time Dostoevskii’s Notes from Underground and Crime and Punishment were published) contains many variants on the word

¹³² Moeller-Sally, 63 (emphasis mine).
¹³³ Ungurianu, 28.
¹³⁶ Smith and Christian, 5.
¹³⁷ Nikolaev, 104.
samovar, including samovarets’, samovarchik (samovar carrier), and samovarisha. The list is striking, given that the word “samovar” is only believed to have existed in the Russian language since the 1770s—less than one hundred years before the publication of Dal’s dictionary. The entry for chai (tea) is much more voluminous, and evinces the richness of Russian aphorisms concerning tea. Dal’ compares khleb-sol’ to chai da sakhar (and its variant chai s sakharom), quoting the saying “khleb’-sol’, zastav’ kogo-libo za chaem” (Roughly, hospitality [bread-salt]: fill someone with tea). Dal’ cites several other tea-related colloquialisms, including “Moskvu naskvoz’ vidno! Etot’ chai—ai, ai, ai!” (Moscow is completely visible! This tea—ai, ai, ai!). Presumably the speaker is exclaiming about how much more clearly he can see when he drinks tea instead of vodka. Dal’s Dictionary, like the contemporary literary works already examined, demonstrates how quickly Russian tea culture was developing in the second half of the nineteenth century, and the creativity with which the invented tradition of chaepitie was working its way deeper into Russian culture.

Dal’s Poslovitsy Russkogo Naroda (Proverbs of the Russian People)—appearing at the same time as War and Peace, several years after his great Dictionary—contains over 30,000 sayings. Not coincidentally, after the front matter of the 1984 edition, on the page where Dal’s collected sayings begin, appears an illustration of a man and a woman sitting at a samovar. The two dozen or so tea references in this work deserve a study unto themselves. “Chainichaet da brazhinchaet” (To drink tea is to revel) is memorable, as is “Chai ty ustal, na mne sidia?” (If you’re tired of tea, may I sit down?). Other colloquialisms lightheartedly reveal the Russian predilection for alcohol: “Chai ne khmel’noe, ne razberet. Chai s pozolotoi (s romom)” (Non-alcoholic tea’s no good. Tea with gold leaf [rum] [is better]). Only two sayings referring to samovars are to be found in the entire collection, and interestingly, both are riddles to which the

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139 According to Smith and Christian, samovar is almost certainly Russian in origin, deriving from the words samyi (self or same) and varit’ (to boil). The word does not seem to have existed in Russian much earlier than the 1770s. Smith and Christian write: “attempts have been made to derive the term from the Turkish sanabar (kettle) but the view that Turkish samavar, Tatar samaur, samuwar etc. are Russian loans appears more probable and is now generally accepted” (237).
140 Dal’, 1282.
answer is “samovar”: “V nebo dyra, v zemliu dyra, posered’ ogon’ da voda” (In heaven a hole, in the earth a hole, in the middle fire and water), and “Stoit kozelok na malen’kikh nozhakh; pyshet i dyshit, a dushi net” (A billy-goat stands on small feet, radiating and breathing, yet without a soul). That aphorisms concerning tea far outnumber references to samovars is not surprising, as most provincial people and peasants would have been exposed to samovars only in marketplaces and inns before they had fallen sufficiently in price to be in widespread use in provincial homes. One is tempted to speculate that this might be the reason the samovar references appear as riddles. What is clear is that Dal’s collection of sayings, published concurrently with so many important fictional works of the late 1860s, evinces a knowledge of tea among the lower classes of Russian society, the great linguistic creativity of these people, and the rapidity with which tea had been established in colloquial Russian. In the few remaining decades of the nineteenth century, the popularization of tea—in literature, in the Russian language and especially in visual culture—would only accelerate, as the next section will demonstrate.

Late nineteenth-century images of the samovar and the popularization of tea

Although references to tea and samovars were common in Russian literature throughout the nineteenth century, visual representations of tea-drinking, and especially samovars, seem to have been comparatively rare until the 1850s. Peasants and other lower-class people may have encountered samovars and sbitenniki in taverns and marketplaces in the first half of the nineteenth century, but in general seem not have been exposed to pictures of them. During the latter half of the century, while the availability of tea was rising and its price falling, visual images—prints, photographs and paintings—demonstrate how “national” Russian tea ways were “seen into being.” In light of the scarcity of quantitative data on samovar ownership among Russians of any social class, visual images can provide clues about popular perceptions of samovars and their distribution (or lack thereof) among the lower strata of society. As the images

144 Ibid., vol. 2, p. 94. “In heaven a hole, in the earth a hole” refers to the fact that samovars have holes in the top (in which charcoal and water are placed) and holes in the bottom (both a tap, and perforations in the base to ventilate the fire inside the central tube).
examine this section will demonstrate, by the 1860s and 70s the samovar played a variety of roles in Russian visual culture. Some artists treated the samovar as a national symbol, incorporating it into their works alongside other symbols of Russian life such as peasants, bast shoes, and balalaikas; others satirized the lifestyles of samovar owners; still others portrayed the samovar in genre scenes meant to describe and comment on aspects of everyday social interaction. By this time, few would dispute the samovar’s prominent place in Russian culture, yet its meaning remained quite fluid, and its role as a signifier of true Russianness contested.

The work of Dmitrii Rovinskii demonstrates that samovars were probably largely absent from the visual culture of the common people before 1850. Rovinskii, a lawyer involved in the judicial reforms of 1864, collected lubki (popular prints) throughout his life. Found throughout the Russian empire, lubki were an integral part of peasant visual culture. In 1881 Rovinskii published his authoritative five-volume collection of lubki entitled Russkie narodnye kartinki, for which he had carefully catalogued and classified hundreds of images. Rovinskii’s interest in these “people’s pictures” was due to his belief in their importance as a form of peasant cultural expression; for him, “the lubok prior to the middle of the nineteenth century represented a folk art that was ‘true to the everyday experience and requirements’ of the Russian people, and Rovinskii viewed it as an accurate reflection of the tastes and attitudes of a wide range of Russian subjects.” Rovinskii believed the censorship laws of 1839 and 1851 “led to the absolute destruction of this branch [lubki] of national village” expression. Rovinskii’s four-volume Russkiia narodnye kartinki atlas contained hundreds of lubki Rovinskii believed to be characteristic of those in circulation before the censorship laws required that images be approved by the state before publication. Most importantly for our purposes, neither tea nor the samovar appear anywhere in this collection. The complete absence of any representation of tea in the Atlas is evidence that before the middle of the nineteenth century, the samovar figured only insignificantly, if at all, in peasant visual culture.

During the second half of the century, samovars not only appeared in Russian lubki, photographs and other visual media, but were included in popular works of art that commented on a wide variety of topics, including domestic spaces, entertainment, social status and national

145 Norris, 77.
146 Quoted in Norris, 44.
identity. Ornately carved distaffs (*prialki*) were a true peasant art form, and the presence of samovars carved on carved distaffs dating from the late nineteenth century evinces both the increasing popularity of tea among the lower classes and the inclusion of the samovar in the repertoire of Russian popular images. An 1868 *lubok* titled “In Marina’s Grove” (“*V Marinoi Roshche*”), produced while Tolstoi was writing *War and Peace*, and just before Dostoevskii’s *Idiot* was published, shows figures dancing and making music while a well-dressed man and his wife sit watching from a tea table. A bear and a goat make music together in a clearing, where people of various social backgrounds have gathered to watch. The presence of a samovar in this image is evidence of the popularization of tea, although it is the upper-class couple, not the peasant revelers, who own the samovar. Another lubok dated 1870 (while Dostoevskii was writing *The Devils*) shows a village council meeting to discuss the relative merits of tea and vodka. This image supports Smith’s claim that “Only in the 1870s had tea drinking become sufficiently widespread among the working people for it to be advocated as an alternative to spirits.” These distaffs and *lubki* reveal that samovars were familiar to those who produced the images, while the wide dissemination of *lubki* throughout the Empire meant that the common people were also increasingly exposed to samovars.

Not only were common people exposed to samovars, in the visual arts they were also increasingly associated with samovar use. The Scottish-Russian photographer William Carrick (1827-78), the son of a Scottish timber merchant who spent his entire life in Russia, graduated from the Russian Academy of Arts in the early 1850s with a degree in architecture. On a trip to Scotland Carrick became interested in the medium of photography, and opened a studio in St. Petersburg with his fellow Scot John MacGregor in 1859. Business was slow at first, as was common for photographers since St. Petersburg lacked both sunlight (necessary at that time for developing photographs) and a middle class (necessary for a clientele). When there were no paying customers, Carrick took common people—priests, nuns, street vendors, beggars, nurses,

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147 See Anthony Netting, “Images and Ideas in Russian Peasant Art,” *Slavic Review* 35, no. 1 (March 1976): 46-68. As sources for his study of peasant visual symbols, Netting uses images carved on distaffs almost exclusively. Netting writes of early distaffs (dating from the late eighteenth century) as commonly featuring individuals seated at table, “sipping wine or tea” (p. 51). Either Netting has discovered some remarkably early representations of Russian tea culture, or more probably, the figures depicted on the distaffs are consuming some other beverage besides tea. One distaff pictured in Netting’s article, dated 1874, shows two figures drinking tea on either side of a stylized samovar.

148 Smith and Christian, 236.
soldiers—off the streets of St. Petersburg and photographed them. For these efforts the heir to the throne, Alexander II’s son Nicholas, gave Carrick a diamond ring as a sign of his appreciation.149

In a series of cartes-de-visite he called “Russian types,” Carrick sought to capture ordinary people as they appeared on the streets of St. Petersburg. Produced in the early 1860s, these images are an invaluable record of the appearance of ordinary people, yet also demonstrative of what Carrick considered “typical.” One photograph of a man in a sheepskin coat with a samovar is labeled “Peasant with samovar” on the Hermitage website, yet the man may not have been a peasant; since most of Carrick’s “types” are shown engaged in their occupations, in all likelihood this man was a tea merchant who owned the samovar he was photographed with.150 The man leans jauntily against the table, as if flaunting himself and the samovar. A second, similarly dressed man joins him in another photograph of the same series. Marvin Lyons in Russia in Original Photographs 1860-1920 labels the two men “Peasants having tea.”151 A more authoritative source calls this same photo “Traders drinking tea.”152 While his friend delicately holds a saucer full of tea, the man from the first photograph looks directly at the camera, and gestures toward the samovar. Again, he seems proud of the samovar and the refinement associated with it. While the men were undoubtedly posed, Carrick was known for his ability to create an environment in which his subjects felt free to be at their ease.153 These photographs indicate that Carrick considered street vendors selling tea by the glass to be a common sight in St. Petersburg. Moreover, the possible mislabeling of these photos by the editors of later collections indicates their (perhaps unconscious) association between nineteenth-century peasants and samovars.

A posed genre photograph made around 1875 shows a group of wealthy peasants around a table. They are dressed in their best, cleanest clothing, and posed in such a way as to display their worldly goods to the greatest advantage. The bowler hat sported by the man on the right

152 Ashbee and Lawson, 24.
153 Ibid., 8. Interestingly, Carrick wrote: “All come up to our a attic, and sit for their likenesses by turns. Come first —served first...If I do make a difference it is certainly towards the humbler and poorer class of customer. I pay more attention to them for they require it more than the loftier or richer” (quoted in Ashbee and Lawson, 8).
seems slightly incongruous with his long linen shirt, while the man across the table from him stands somewhat awkwardly, poised to set a freshly polished samovar at the center of the table. A boy pours vodka into a small glass, while a man holding a balalaika sits grinning at the camera. This photograph probably does not represent the life of the common people accurately; possibly the samovar, the balalaika, and the vodka comprise the photographer’s idea of what a Russian peasant household was supposed to contain. The people photographed, for their part, obviously took pride in the level of sophistication evinced by the bowler hat, balalaika, and samovar. The new technology of photography was hailed for its ability to represent life realistically, yet as in these photographs, photography both offers a rare glimpse into the past and demonstrates a remarkable capacity for manipulation. No sooner was this medium introduced into Russia than photographers created images of Russians and their samovars. As these photographs and the paintings discussed below indicate, the samovar was a desirable possession for many in Russia, and was featured more and more frequently in images of Russian life in the waning years of the nineteenth century.

Perhaps the best example of the multifaceted role of the samovar in Russian visual culture lies in the paintings of the Peredvizhniki (sometimes translated “Wanderers”). The Tovarishchestvo peredvizhnykh khudozhestvennikh vystavok (Association of Traveling Art Exhibits) was established in 1870-71, around the same time as the publication of Dostoevskii’s Idiot and The Devils. Unlike earlier attempts to liberate artists from the perceived creative oppression of the Russian Academy of Arts, the Tovarishchestvo “had almost everything working in its favor: energetic organizers, well-known members, a favorable press, good patronage and a receptive public.”154 One of the primary goals of the Peredvizhniki was to give people in all the major cities of the Russian Empire, together with those living in the provinces, the opportunity to develop an appreciation for contemporary Russian art.155 Just as in the realm of literature, the “popular” and “cultural” spheres were increasingly overlapping in the late nineteenth century, in the visual arts the Peredvizhniki strove to bring art to the common people. In response to this challenge to the Academy’s monopoly on Russian art, the Academy made repeated attempts to

155 Ibid., 39.
absorb the group—many of its members having “seceded” from the Academy in order to achieve greater creative autonomy. The liberal press and the intelligentsia took up the cause of the *Peredvizhniki*, lauding their bold independence from academic officialdom. Despite opposition from the Academy and censorship aimed at undermining the movement’s endorsement by the liberal press, the *Peredvizhniki* became prestigious in their own right, and commercially successful. Although the provincial exhibitions organized by the *Peredvizhniki* did not reach peasants or working-class people on a wide scale, “[w]hen one considers how limited artistic life in the two principal cities of the Russian Empire was by comparison with that in Western Europe...then one can imagine what backwaters the smaller cities were when the *Tovarishchestvo* brought them their first public art shows ever.”\(^{156}\) The exhibitions aroused much excitement in provincial towns, and were extensively discussed in the local press. The memoirs of one liberal writer named Vladimir Korolenko convey the enthusiasm surrounding the *Tovarishchestvo* in the provinces: “When the exhibits came, the sleepy provincial towns at least for a short period got away from cards, gossip, boredom and breathed the fresh currents of free art. Discussions and disagreements arose on themes over which the citizens had never thought before.”\(^{157}\) Orlando Figes writes of the Peredvizhniki, “The impact of their tours was enormous....In this way the ‘national style’ of Moscow became the idiom of the provinces as well.”\(^{158}\)

The *Peredvizhniki* came to be known as the “national” school of Russian art, “proclaim[ing] both their arrival and their credentials as the school that firmly established the ‘Russian’ within contemporary visual culture, and with this consolidated a position of the most successful and genuinely popular movement in Russian art history.”\(^{159}\) One of the primary individuals responsible for the explicit linkage of the *Peredvizhniki* with Russian nationalism was the influential critic Vladimir Stasov (1824-1906). A well known writer on music, literature and the visual arts from the 1850s, Stasov was largely responsible for the public image of the *Peredvizhniki* when the movement first became active. Stasov called for art that was both national (*natsional’nyi*), in the sense of being distinct from foreign art, and popular (*narodnyi*) in

\(^{156}\) Ibid., 45-46.
\(^{157}\) Quoted in Valkenier, *Russian Realist Art*, 46.
\(^{158}\) Figes, 198.
its goal of representing the life of the common people and advocating their cause among the higher strata of society.\textsuperscript{160} Despite the possible incongruity of these two concepts, Stasov can be credited with (or accused of) shaping the practices and viewpoints of the \textit{Peredvizhники} as a group and touting them as the harbingers of a new, national Russian art. Stasov wanted the artists to paint small canvases so they could be easily transported and made available for display in private homes, and urged them to produce engravings and other inexpensive replicas of their works so they could be as accessible and widely available as possible.\textsuperscript{161} In Stasov’s eyes, the \textit{Peredvizhники} were to address themselves to the \textit{narod} (people), and it was the latter’s responsibility to respond by consciously working to improve their lot.

As a self-proclaimed national and popular movement, the \textit{Peredvizhники} acquired a certain authority to create images that were considered representative of and unique to the Russian nation. The presence of samovars in so many of their paintings demonstrates that by the 1870s, when the movement became active in the provinces, the samovar was common enough (albeit unattainable for the peasants and working classes) to be represented in paintings meant to document Russian everyday life. Furthermore, on the other side of the equation, by featuring the samovar as a fixture of Russian space, the \textit{Peredvizhники} communicated the idea of the samovar’s Russianness to audiences for whom the traveling exhibitions formed their first and sometimes sole conception of “Russian art.” Samovars appear in dozens of of their paintings, and as the small selection discussed below will demonstrate, it would seem that by the 1860s and 70s the samovar was firmly ensconced in these artists’ conception of what it meant to be Russian.

Nikolai Vasilievich Nevrev (1830-1904) was an opponent of serfdom and a critic of the Church. A master of satire and genre painting, Nevrev also had a great talent for rendering historical scenes. He spent his entire life in Moscow, and was well acquainted with the everyday culture of its various social strata.\textsuperscript{162} His “Protodeacon, wishing long life to a merchant on his name-day” (\textit{Protodiakon, provozghlashuushchii na kupecheskikh imeninakh dolgoletie}, 1866)

\textsuperscript{160} Valkenier, \textit{Russian Realist Art}, 57. Valkenier further notes that Stasov never considered these two tenets incompatible, that the two were inextricably linked in his mind, and neither seemed to take precedence over the other.
\textsuperscript{162} Elizabeth Valkenier, \textit{The Wanderers: Masters of 19th-Century Russian Painting: An Exhibition from the Soviet Union} (Dallas: Dallas Museum of Art, 1990), 125.
depicts a rotund ecclesiastic in full cry, surrounded by figures reacting expressively. This painting shows how painful a social gathering could be, in quite a literal sense: the woman in blue at right seems to be plugging her ear, while her son gazes at the singer in disbelief; a baby squalls in the background, and even the man in the portrait on the wall seems to be looking askance at the performance. Most of the men sing along enthusiastically, no doubt abetted in their musical endeavors by alcohol (note the decanter barely visible on the table at the far left). Nevrev lightheartedly satirizes the clergymen, whom no one is taking seriously. Moreover, the singer’s body physically separates the women in the room from most of the men; the women seem desirous of drinking their tea peacefully, and possibly even attempting a conversation, yet to no avail (even the teapot on top of the samovar is slightly askew).\(^\text{163}\) Meanwhile, on the other side of the portly cleric, the men help themselves to more alcohol than is probably good for them. The is painting is valuable for its descriptive power, psychological insight and even for the indication of beverage preferences among men and women; yet it also posits the samovar as an important feature of social interaction even as it pokes fun at it.

The more serious “Inspection of the Bride” (Smotriny, 1888) is one of Nevrev’s best-known paintings. The daughter of a priest, who will inherit his property, is being married to a young seminarian. The bride-to-be does not seem overly interested in her betrothed, and lowers her gaze demurely; the young man sits bolt upright, and one can almost sense his pleasure at being paired with such an attractive and well-mannered young woman. In the background, the parents discuss the particularities of the match; every detail connotes propriety and tact. Concerning this work, Valkenier writes: “Interior details always play an important role in the genre paintings of Nevrev, who did not think of interiors as simply a backdrop or scenery. Every detail in the setting is part of the overall characterization and enhances our understanding of the subject.”\(^\text{164}\) The tall, slender samovar echoes the shape of the young man, and seems to embody the refinement exuded by the entire scene. At the same time, this work sends the message that propriety and convention can mask underlying tension, and may also be a commentary on the

\(^{163}\) Nota Bene: Although Russians did not invent the samovar, they do seem to have been responsible for the innovation of placing a teapot on top of the samovar to keep it warm.

\(^{164}\) Ibid.
situation of women: the girl, who is the central yet most passive figure in the painting, seems powerless in the arrangement of her future life.\footnote{For a similar scene of the boredom and even banality of provincial refinement, see Baksheev’s painting Zhiteiskaia proza (1892-93).}

Like Nevrev and other *Peredvizhniki*, Vladimir Egorovich Makovskii (1846-1920) painted scenes concerning contemporary events, including his “Bank Failure” (1881). In “Evening Gathering” (*Večerinka*, 1875-97), Makovskii spent over twenty years (on and off) rendering this intimate gathering of young revolutionaries. The painting focuses on a young, progressive woman who seems to have just finished speaking, and gazes into the distance as if still enchanted by the ideas she has just expressed. David Jackson calls this painting “an homage to the Populist movement with its students and intellectuals, young protagonists and elder statesmen and women.”\footnote{Jackson, 61. As another example of an image in which the samovar features in a visual commentary on contemporary intellectual debates, see Makovskii’s later painting *Veseda idealist-praktik i materialist-teoretik* (1900).} The samovar is here associated with a movement that crosses generational, class and gender boundaries; moreover, the intimacy (and secrecy?) of the meeting are emphasized by its taking place in a dark, enclosed space lit only by the overhead lamp and its light reflected in the samovar. Indeed the young woman, the lamp, and the samovar form a tight triangle at the center of the painting. Populist ideals about getting in touch with the *narod* are reflected in the comradeship of this gathering, much as the only light source in the painting is magnified by the samovar.

Makovskii was best known for his genre scenes, which he began producing in the 1860s according to the style then popular in Moscow. In “The Nightingale Fanciers” (*Liubiteli Solov’ev*, 1872-73), Makovskii depicts a trio of men listening intently to the bird’s song. As in Klodt’s “*Za Chaikom,*** the samovar seems just as natural and Russian an object as the icons, icon-lamp, and religiously themed *lubki* on the walls. In this way, the samovar serves many of the same purposes in these paintings as it did in the literature discussed above: it was an anchor of the home, appearing as natural and Russian as icons. Dostoevskii’s comments on this painting are worth quoting at length:

\begin{quote}
Something touching to the point of stupidity is happening here. The man sitting by the window has lowered his head slightly. He has raised one hand and holds it suspended. He listens attentively, melts, a blissful smile on his face….The other sits at the table, drinking tea, almost with his back to us, but you know he is “suffering” no less than his companion. In front of them is
the host who has called them in to listen and, of course, to sell them the nightingale….Perhaps
someone might also interpret it as saying...that the average Russian merchant has two passions—
trotting horses and nightingales, and that it is terribly funny for that reason: but what follows from
that? That knowledge is something abstract and it would be very hard for a German to grasp why
it is so funny. We, though, look at the little painting and smile. We recall it later and again for
some reason are pleasantly amused. People can laugh at me if they like, but I truly think that in
these little paintings there is actually love of humanity, not just specifically of the Russians, but
even of mankind generally.\textsuperscript{167}

Although Dostoevskii sees in this painting a love for humanity that transcends national
boundaries, the humor aroused by the image, together with its particularities—including both the
merchants’ interest in nightingales, and their material surroundings—he claims are uniquely
Russian. Throughout his life, Makovskii maintained a critical-realist stance in his art; in 1905 he
would depict Russia’s “Bloody Sunday” (with plenty of blood). He painted what he felt was
characteristic of the times he lived in, and no doubt his paintings conveyed a similar message
about Russianness, as Dostoevskii claimed.

Like Makovskii, Aleksei Ivanovich Korzukhin (1835-94) eventually returned to the
Academy once it had loosened its restrictions on painters’ subject matter, and like Makovskii he
held “basically Populist sympathies.”\textsuperscript{168} Korzukhin had not submitted any works to the first
traveling exhibit of the \textit{Tovarishchestvo}, and for that reason was formally excluded from that
movement per its charter, but he nevertheless remained faithful to the movement’s ideals.
Korzukhin was interested in the everyday life of peasants, the urban poor, and the middle classes,
which subsequently has earned him inclusion by later scholars among the \textit{Peredvizhniki}.\textsuperscript{169} Three
paintings typical of Korzukhin’s work display the samovar as an integral part of Russian
everyday life in three very different contexts. The first, “Return from the City” (\textit{Vozrashchenie iz
goroda}, 1870) shows a father, having just returned from a trip to town, presenting gifts to his
children while a woman (presumably his wife) pours water into a samovar. The family prepares
to celebrate the father’s return from the city—and possibly some successful business transaction
—by having tea together, yet the samovar appears out of place in such humble surroundings. In
1870, when the painting was produced, samovar ownership was becoming more common for

\textsuperscript{167} Quoted in Yelena Nesterova, \textit{The Itinerants: The Masters of Russian Realism: Second Half of the 19\textsuperscript{th} and Early
20\textsuperscript{th} Centuries} (Bournemouth: Parkstone Publishers, 1996), 79-80.
\textsuperscript{168} Alan Bird, \textit{A History of Russian Painting} (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1987), 160.
\textsuperscript{169} See Valkenier, \textit{The Wanderers}, 100.
merchants and petty businessmen; still, given the relative poverty of the home, it seems unlikely
that such a family could have owned such a fine samovar at this time.

“Razluka” (The Separation, 1872) portrays a family of significantly better means
gathered around the samovar. The boy and the woman standing in the background are dressed for
traveling; presumably the boy is leaving home to attend school (and looks none too happy about
it). As in Tolstoi’s Childhood, Boyhood and Youth, the samovar both represents family
togetherness and is present at an important time of transition between life stages. Like Nikolenka
and his parents in Tolstoi’s novel, this family gathers together around the samovar one last time
before their son embarks on a new phase of his life. “In a Monastery Hotel” (V Monastyrskoj
Gostinitse, 1882) pictures various persons, clerical and otherwise, drinking tea and in varying
stages of arrival and departure. Here the samovar represents the kind of Russian hospitality
typically found in lodging houses. This painting favorably disposes the viewer toward the
Orthodox monks pictured in it, particularly the priest who sits attentively listening to the woman
on his left, despite the apparent attempt of another woman (across from him, bowing) to gain his
attention. The work displays an interesting mix of social propriety and the hurried disarray that
must have been perpetually present in such an establishment. Most importantly, Korzukhin
portrays the monastery guest house as a site of Russian hospitality, evinced by the elderly woman
at the center of the painting who pours out the very last drops from the samovar into a guest’s
cup. The samovar plays a similar role in all three of Korzukhin’s paintings, despite their
widely differing contexts.

Vasilii Grigor’evich Perov (1833-82) would depict Russian clergy far less favorably, and
his paintings reveal that neither tea nor the samovar were universally accepted or uncontroversial
in Russian culture. Perov was socially underprivileged because of his illegitimate birth, and was
best known for his scathing social critique, especially when aimed at the Orthodox clergy. Stasov
lauded him for his depiction of “common national types.” In Perov’s well-known painting
“Tea Drinking at Mytishchi near Moscow” (Chaepitie v Mytishchakh bliz Moskvy, 1862), a
corpulent Orthodox priest reclines pompously at an outdoor table, enjoying his steaming tea and
looking the other direction as beggars in rags entreat him to share. His servant girl, who is

170 Compare this painting with the disorderly scene depicted in Viktor Vasnetsov’s Chaepitie v traktire (1874).
171 Valkenier, Russian Realist Art, 126.
physically pushing away the adult beggar—a war veteran who has lost a leg—pours water into the samovar from a pitcher. The priest, together with another servant in the background, is already drinking a steaming saucer of tea, so the girl must be preparing their second round. Thus Perov reinforces the selfishness and overindulgence of the priest, who is having another samovar-full of water prepared but refuses to share anything with the poor; the presence of the samovar emphasizes the priest’s wasteful opulence.

Perov was not the only one to consider the samovar a symbol of idle luxury—although of course, his satirization of a lifestyle associated with the object in one painting does not mean he categorically condemned samovars. As we have seen, characters in The Brothers Karamazov censure the late Elder Zosima for having enjoyed tea, and question the appropriateness of monks’ consuming it. In the second half of the nineteenth century the Orthodox Church had a somewhat strained relationship with the new tradition of chaepitie. Many Orthodox—notably the Old Believers—regarded the samovar as a worldly and sinful luxury. In his Poslovitsy Rosskogo Naroda, Dal’ records several Old Believer sayings denouncing tea, for example: “Kto p’et chai, tot spaseniia ne chai” (He who drinks tea is not saved by it). Other Old Believer aphorisms lumped tea, coffee, tobacco and even the newly-introduced potato together and categorically condemned them all: “Chai, kofe, kartofel’, tabak prokliaty na semi vselenskikh soborakh” (Tea, coffee, potatoes and tobacco were damned by the seventh Ecumenical Council); and again: “Paguba dushevnaia i telesnaia: chai, kofe, tabak” (Perdition spiritual and bodily: tea, coffee, tobacco). Tea and sugar were considered skorom’ (that which was forbidden to consume on fast days), and since devout believers would fast for almost half the days of the year, this was no small matter. Samovars were not to be lit on fast days (recall Chekhov’s fiction discussed above), although of course those wealthy enough to own samovars were somewhat less likely to observe the fasts. Around 1900, the ethnographer S.V. Maksimov wrote that “the peasants consider it to be an unforgivable sin to drink tea with sugar during a fast: tea itself is a semisinful drink, while sugar is unconditionally skorom’, because, in the understanding of the peasants, it is made out of animal bones….In general, the peasants, especially the elderly...would

174 Ibid.
sooner die than defile their souls with skorom’ food.”175 Knowing this, the overindulgent priest in Perov’s painting is all the more scandalous.

For some among the deeply devout peasantry in the second half of the nineteenth century, tea was a foreign luxury and therefore suspect, as another saying recorded by Dal’ reveals: “Lords and dogs eat skorom’.”176 Similarly, Maksimov observed the peasants’ pride in fulfilling the will of God by fasting: “Only we little peasants can fulfill the fasts, because the learned people and the nobles won’t—they couldn’t last a day without tea and beef.”177 As early as 1834, the journal Drug zdraviia (Friend of Health) published an article warning of the negative effects of overindulgence in certain foods. As an example, the article cited the story of a man who began to laugh uncontrollably and quote poetry after having drunk thirty cups of strong black tea.178

The suspicion with which some peasants regarded tea in the late nineteenth century undermines the myth of the samovar’s Russianness, as peasants were understood by many to be the true bearers of Russian culture and identity. Late nineteenth-century peasants still could not afford to drink tea regularly, and some may have chosen not to had they been able. And yet, neither tea itself nor the samovar were targeted as inherently sinful or detrimental to righteous living; rather, the Church sought to curb overindulgence and what it considered an unhealthy preoccupation with worldly commodities. Even in Perov’s satirical painting, it is the priest’s behavior, not the samovar itself, that is outrageous; in a just society, the priests, his servants, and the beggars would all have equal access to the samovar and the abundance it represents.

Nevertheless, the samovar was viewed as a status symbol in the countryside, and owning one was highly desirable for those who wished to appear prosperous and refined. Country folk without access to samovars sometimes even resorted to constructing their own.179 Such seems to have been the case in an 1897 painting by Klavdiv Vasilievich Lebedev, who had been a member of the Peredvizhniki since 1891. “In the Motherland” (Na Rodine) features a group of women (and one man) gathered around a table, at the center of which stands a homemade samovar. A teapot is just visible behind it, and a teacup and saucer lie unused on the tablecloth. Here again,

175 Quoted in Levnid Heretz, “Fasting in Russian Peasant Culture,” in Glants and Toomre, Food in Russian History and Culture, 72.
176 Quoted in Heretz, 75.
177 Ibid.
178 Quoted in Smith, Recipes for Russia, 51.
179 Ivanova, Russkie Samovary, 9.
the artist portrays the samovar as a prominent fixture of Russian space, and painting’s title strengthens the association between the samovar and the Motherland. Russians had made the samovar their own beginning in the early decades of the nineteenth century, and so it seems fitting that at its close Lebedev should represent this family having literally made their own samovar, in much the same way as Russia had constructed its national identity over the course of the century.

As further evidence of the desirability of samovar ownership in the provinces, a painting by Vasilii Maksimovich Maksimov (1844-1911) features samovars as the main objects for sale at an auction where the repossessed goods are being sold. “Auktsion za Nedoiimki” (Auctioning Repossessed Goods, 1880-81) shows a crowded village square in winter, where various household items are being auctioned off. Prominent among these are two samovars lying in the snow, which have been repossessed and are up for auction; a woman at right holds a third samovar and some coats which she has apparently just purchased. This image may indicate that samovars were such a desirable possession in the provinces that people bought them even if they could not afford them; for the townspeople in this work the samovar is still a luxury item, and among the most valuable possessions of provincial families. In this painting, Maksimov documents an interesting contemporary event, but also comments on the changing economic situation in the provinces.

Despite their intellectual differences and varying portrayals of the samovar, the Peredvizhniki succeeded in visually tying the samovar and the social ritual of chaepitie to Russian national culture. Long after the movement died out and was absorbed by the very artistic establishment it had once striven to escape, the Tovarishchestvo continued to influence the popular conception of Russianness. Even today, Yelena Nesterova writes, “In the mind of the general public, Russian art in the second half of the nineteenth century is entirely associated with the work of the Itinerants.”180 One of the very best examples of this association between the samovar and the glorious past is another painting by Vasilii Maksimov, who had joined the Peredvizhniki in 1872. In “All in the Past” (Vse v Proshlom, 1889), Maksimov depicts an impoverished estate owner and her faithful servant having tea outdoors. The boarded-up house in

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180 Nesterova, 7.
the background and the samovar are all that remain of the woman’s lost wealth. Maksimov is commenting on the fate of the Russian gentry, who were gradually becoming an endangered species (as in Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard*). More importantly, this work is about nostalgia; the samovar is a touchstone for the “good old days.” Referencing this painting, Priscilla Roosevelt writes, “In the final half-century of Imperial Russia, painters and writers were especially sensitive to the illusory quality of the estate and captured it even better than the camera.”

“Vse v Proshlom” acknowledges that the honeyed life of the Russian aristocracy was already a thing of the past, but it would be easy for later viewers to interpret this painting as saying that the samovar belongs to a long-lost, distinctively Russian past.

Similarly, Valkenier writes of the *Peredvizhniki*, “Their pictures gave the contemporary public a commentary on current happenings, and to succeeding generations a pictorial documentation of the past.” These artists documented Russia during their lifetimes, but in doing so they succeeded in projecting the samovar back in time. Their multifaceted depictions of this foreign object reveal how rapidly it had been incorporated into Russian visual and material culture. Perhaps the suddenness of the samovar’s appearance in the Russian visual arts is due in part to the great literary figures who had prepared the way. What is certain is that by the 1860s and 70s, the samovar’s roles in Russian culture, and artists’ interpretations of those roles, were complex and evolving. For some peasants and Old Believers, the samovar was a worldly, sinful luxury that threatened the eternal soul; for some of the Populists and liberal intelligentsia, the samovar was a socially irresponsible luxury, endangering societal cohesion. In a more general sense, for the *Peredvizhniki* the samovar is a symbol of Russian national culture. In their paintings, the samovar seems equally at home in peasant izbas (cottages), merchants’ houses and aristocratic households. Images reinforce ideals, and based on Russian art of the nineteenth century, people living in the twentieth quite naturally concluded that the samovar must be an authentic element of old Russian culture.

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181 Roosevelt, 319.
182 Valkenier, *Russian Realist Art*, 95.


**Conclusion: Samovars in the twentieth century and beyond**

Tea had been assigned a prominent place in Russian culinary, literary and visual culture within a very short space of historical time. With remarkable cultural amnesia, some commentators attributed the rapid rise in tea’s popularity to Russia’s cold climate. A journal article of 1837 acknowledged the appropriateness of a law allowing tea to be sold in *kharchevni* (cheap eating and drinking establishments), reasoning that people “of every type” have “a need in our severe climate for a drink that can warm them.”\(^{183}\) The fact that Russians been brewing hot plant-derived drinks for centuries weakens this argument considerably. Though tea was new in the early nineteenth century, the custom of brewing hot plant-derived beverages and enjoying them socially was much older, and this probably facilitated Russia’s rapid adoption of tea. Long before tea drinking became popular or affordable, beverages such as the aforementioned *sbiten’,* *berezovitsa* (made from birch tree sap) and *medovukha* (made from honey, hops, and yeast) were widely drunk among the peasantry.\(^{184}\) Later, the mildly fermented *kvas* (made from rye bread) largely replaced the more traditional drinks. The rapidity with which these were forgotten (with the exception of *kvas*) testifies to the selective memory that facilitated and accelerated the invention of traditions such as *chaepitie.*

Social, economic and cultural transformation also created an environment conducive to the proliferation of invented traditions. As Hobsbawm notes, “we should expect [the invention of tradition] to occur more frequently when a rapid transformation of society weakens or destroys the patterns for which ‘old’ traditions had been designed.”\(^{185}\) Thus the development of samovar lore may have been partially a response to the gradual waning of old Russian folkways; indeed, “[w]here the old ways are alive, traditions need neither be revived nor invented.”\(^{186}\) As we have seen, while samovars acquired all sorts of powerful emotional associations in the Russian imagination, the actual content of tea-related traditions remained imprecise. “The nature of the values, rights and obligations of the group membership” inculcated by samovar use were fluid, and yet “the practices symbolizing it were virtually compulsory.”\(^{187}\) As the paintings of the

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\(^{183}\) Quoted in Smith, *Recipes for Russia,* 95.

\(^{184}\) Snejana Tempest, “Stovelore in Russian Folklife,” in *Food in Russian History and Culture,* 3.

\(^{185}\) Hobsbawm, 4.

\(^{186}\) Ibid., 8.

\(^{187}\) Ibid., 10-11 (emphasis in original).
*Peredvizhniki* discussed above have shown, the samovar was a ubiquitous feature of everyday social interaction, and even more so because of the widely varying contexts in which it appeared. As a symbolically charged sign of community membership, the samovar transcended socioeconomic or ideological difference—hence it appears equally at home in peasant huts and in aristocratic mansions. To borrow again from Hobsbawm, the significance of tea drinking, epitomized by the samovar, “lay precisely in [its] undefined universality.”

Although the meaning of the samovar remained ill-defined, in Russian historical and personal memories it retained powerful associations with childhood and family life. Over the course of the nineteenth century, the cultural cultural figures discussed above established the samovar as a *lieu de mémoire*, or site of memory. Pierre Nora’s description of sites of memory seems particularly well-suited to the samovar: “*Lieux de mémoire* are simple and ambiguous, natural and artificial, at once immediately available in concrete sensual experience and susceptible to the most abstract elaboration. Indeed, they are *lieux* in three senses of the word—material, symbolic, and functional.” In Russian nineteenth-century literary and visual art, the samovar was both sign and signified, a self-referential symbol pointing to and embodying some otherwise inexpressible essence of Russian identity.

By the close of the nineteenth century, demand for tea was sufficiently large to prompt attempts to grow the leaf in Russian territory. To this end, plantations were established in the Caucasus, one of the very few areas controlled by Russia with conditions suitable for tea cultivation. In 1893 a merchant by the name of Popov had established the first tea plantation near the Georgian town of Batumi, and others soon followed his example. In 1913, Georgian tea plantations yielded around 300,000 pounds of processed tea, yet this accounted for only 1% of the tea then consumed annually in Russia. Caucasian tea cultivation suffered a major blow when all but a few hundred acres of tea were destroyed in the Civil War that followed the Revolution (1917-21).

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188 Ibid.,11.
In the early 1920s, the Soviet government launched a program intended to boost tea production in Georgia. “The main objective of this State project was to produce sufficient quantities of tea to satisfy the national needs for this beverage.”\(^{191}\) Not surprisingly, the Soviet government never accomplished this goal, though by 1940 imported tea accounted for only 56% of that consumed in the Soviet Union. During World War II, the Nazi invasion forced Soviet agriculture to focus more on the cultivation of basic foodstuffs than on tea. In the early 1950s, domestic tea production recovered and increased rapidly, and trade agreements with China and India ensured the importation of vast amounts of tea into the USSR. All the same, by 1960, the Soviet Union was producing about 55% of the tea it consumed.\(^{192}\)

Although prominent among the Bolsheviks’ stated goals was the utter transformation of everyday life (byt), Russian tea customs reveal a striking degree of cultural continuity between the Imperial and Soviet periods. Soviet art was intended—and indeed believed to have the power—to transform life and shape individuals into “new Soviet” men and women, yet social interaction around the samovar continued as before. If anything, Russians clung to their tea traditions even more tightly in the midst of the unprecedented social and economic change precipitated by the Revolution of 1917. Although tea and the samovar had originally entered Russia as accessories of the “bourgeois decadence” the Bolsheviks so despised, demand for tea rose as the twentieth century wore on. Samovar imagery continued unabated in literature, notably in the works of Mikhail Zoshchenko and especially Maksim Gorkii, whose writings are as rich in samovar symbolism as those of Dostoevskii and Tolstoi. Gorkii even published a collection of short stories entitled (after one of Pushkin’s stories) *Zhil-Byl Samovar* (“Once upon a time there lived a samovar”), the eponymous tale featuring a samovar that falls in love with a teapot.\(^{193}\)

The paintings of Boris Kustodiev (1878-1927), who like Gorkii contributed significantly to the artistic life of the Soviet Union, was known for his vibrant genre scenes. Kustodiev’s pre-1917 works had been sympathetic to revolutionary movements, and after the Revolution he produced many paintings “in which the revolutionary events are treated as a popular festivity,

\(^{191}\) Ibid.

\(^{192}\) Ibid., 172. It is also interesting to note in passing that the Russians were the first to invent a mechanical tea harvester in the 1930s. Thanks to this invention and its successors, today even most of the world’s finest teas are mechanically harvested.

and imbued with optimism and a sense of celebration.”

For Kustodiev, then, the Revolution was a new and promising phase of Russia’s development. Most famous is his 1918 work “Kupchikha za Chaem” (Merchant’s wife having tea), which depicts a well-to-do woman enjoying tea in an idyllic outdoor setting. Though the years immediately following the Revolution were marked by violence and instability, Kustodiev produced many similar, almost kitschy works during this period. His “Kupchikha na balkone” (Merchant’s wife on the balcony), painted in 1920, features the same foods, the same colorful cupolas, and even the same cat. In Kustodiev’s many paintings featuring samovars, everyday Russian scenes remain outwardly unchanged by the Revolution, yet are given new meaning by the advent of Communism.

Even more telling are the many Socialist Realist paintings featuring samovars. In the two most famous paintings depicting what the authorities wanted life to be like on the kolkhoz (collective farm), samovars represent the abundance collective farm workers were supposed to enjoy. In Sergei Gerasimov’s Collective Farm Festival (1936-37), a group of agricultural workers gather around a table where a feast is being laid. A man at the center of the painting makes a speech, no doubt hailing the victory of Communist agriculture. A samovar stands on a table directly under his right elbow, implying the leisure available to these workers. In a painting finished in the same year as Gerasimov’s, and sharing the same name, “the most valuable and compelling painter of the Stalin period,” Arkadii Plastov, evokes a rollicking feast upon which Stalin smiles down benevolently. In this work, which Matthew Cullerne Bown refers to as “a paradigm of socialist realism under Stalin, one of the key works of the movement,” a banner echoing Stalin’s words “Life has become better, life has become happier” hangs over a scene of joyful exuberance. Women dance, boys hold musical instruments, and people of all ages enjoy the fruits of collectivization. Three samovars are visible, including a large silver specimen at the exact center of the painting. In this image, the samovar literally stands at the center of communal prosperity. This work helps to convince the viewer that thanks to collectivization, the Russian people are able to enjoy all the benefits of their rich cultural and culinary traditions, and even that these have been taken to new heights of authenticity and freedom of expression. Yet both

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195 Other well-known renderings of chaepitie by Kustodiev include: Na terrase (1906), Chaepitie (1913), Moskovskii traktir (1916), Osen’v provintsii: chaepitie (1926).
Collective Farm Festival paintings were produced at the height of the Stalinist terror. The samovar appears in its familiar context of Russian hospitality and communalism, though in the case of these paintings and the works by Kustodiev discussed above, such images were created during periods of extreme violence and socioeconomic hardship. In this context, then, it is perhaps not surprising that this culture should produce images containing samovars, which in the art and literature of the previous decades had evoked memories of national harmony and undisturbed family gatherings.

And yet, like so many other aspects of Soviet culture, the attitude of the authorities toward tea drinking and samovar use seem somewhat contradictory. While the paintings discussed above testify that the Bolsheviks certainly did not explicitly discourage tea drinking or samovar use, they did censor Elena Molokhovets’ A Gift to Young Housewives, which is full of tea-related recipes and even contains instructions for the proper display of one’s samovar. Since its publication in 1861, this massive cookbook “was a treasured asset in many families where it was handed down from one generation to another and even carried into exile. [Molokhovets’] name became a household word and passed into the culture of the period.”197 The work was not printed after the Revolution, having become a symbol of bourgeois decadence, and seemed especially offensive during periods of food shortage.198 Moreover, Molokhovets’ book had been intended mainly for affluent households, and the presence of servants is assumed. After the author’s introduction, the very first topic treated in this encyclopedic work is “Evening Tea,” and the section’s opening remarks concern the careful placement of the samovar at one end of the long dinner table. The menu for evening tea includes tea pastries, English biscuits, and other baked goods; fruit, rum, red wine, and syrups; five types of bread; meats and cheeses; tongue; and sherbet. Only after describing in great detail the setting and arrangement of food on the tea table does Molokhovets turn to the arrangement of the kitchen, and thence to her collection of recipes. Aside from the first section and recipes for tea-related foods, A Gift to Young Housewives contains many other tea references; in several recipes, teacups are used as measurements. Others feature both green and yellow tea as ingredients in plombières and

198 Ibid., 3.
punches. Molokhovets’ cookbook evinces the ubiquity of tea in well-to-do Russian kitchens, and the samovar’s importance in the work signals its acceptance as an obligatory fixture of decent households.

The Soviets suppressed *A Gift to Young Housewives* because of its association with the lifestyle of the affluent classes, and could have discouraged samovar use for the same reason, but did not. I can only speculate on possible reasons for this. Perhaps here, as in Perov’s painting *Tea Drinking Near Moscow*, the socially irresponsible lifestyles of those likely to own samovars are condemned, while the samovar itself remains simply an object of material culture. Another possibility is that the writers and artists of the previous century had succeeded so well in portraying the samovar as a symbol of community, and their works had provided such strong evidence that the object was deeply engrained in Russian culture, that no one bothered to censure it.

Whatever the reasons for the Bolsheviks’ implicit approval of the samovar, the object certainly figured prominently in the memoirs of those who left Russia during the first turbulent decades of the twentieth century. Russian-born Elizavetta Dmitrovna married an American soldier and lived with him in Shanghai and later at his parents’ home in Virginia while he was interned by the Japanese during World War II. Shortly before he was repatriated, she published her book *Samovar: A Russian Cook Book: Famous Recipes of Old Russia Adapted to American Kitchens*. Aside from the introduction, no mention of tea or the samovar is made in her little red book; yet the samovar so epitomized Dmitrovna’s memories of Russia and its culinary culture that she found it “fitting” to title her cookbook full of time-honored family recipes *Samovar*. Having lived in various cities all over the Soviet Union, China, and the United States, Dmitrovna believed the presence of her samovar, and the adaptability of the recipes she recorded in her book, preserved her Russian identity across time and space.

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199 See Toomre, 465. While green tea was widely drunk in Central Asia and was readily available in Russia, yellow tea was rare and very costly; its presence in *A Gift to Young Housewives* signals that the work was intended for households with a sizable grocery budget. Yellow tea—so called because it is processed less rigorously than green teas, but more than white—had been one of the tea varieties produced exclusively for the use of the Chinese imperial court, and taking yellow tea out of China was forbidden. Today yellow tea is still scarce and very expensive in the West.

The same was true for Alexander Poliakoff, son of the famous inventor Joseph Poliakoff, who fled the Soviet Union for England after the 1917 Revolution. Poliakoff’s 1996 memoir, *The Silver Samovar: Reminiscences of the Russian Revolution*, is a fascinating account of a wealthy Jewish family’s experience of the Revolution and its aftermath. “Russians are well known for cherishing their past,” Poliakoff wrote on the frontispiece of his book. “I was not quite fourteen when I left...No matter how long I have been away or how much English association I have had, such things are not to be forgotten.” For Poliakoff, keeping alive the memory of his native land was a means of preserving his Russian identity—and the family’s silver samovar stood at the center that memory, as the title of his memoir testifies. Although he refers to the samovar periodically throughout his memoir, unlike Dmitrovna Poliakoff assumes the title of his memoir to be self-explanatory and so does not find it necessary to discuss his reasons for titling his book *The Silver Samovar*.

Another account of the samovar’s staying power as a symbol of Russian identity comes from the unlikely source of an unpublished work by an antique store owner in Anchorage, Alaska. In 1971, the same year as the *Soviet Life* article mentioned in the introduction, Mary Jane Barry typed up her hand-illustrated booklet entitled *The Samovar: Its History and Use*. Although she is not of Russian extraction, many samovars passed through the doors of Barry’s antique shop in Anchorage over the years, and her enthusiasm led her to research the history of samovars among Alaskans of Russian descent.

The samovar is one of the delightful objects of association modern Alaskans have with the old Russian heritage which still lingers in Alaska. Years ago, when the Russians settled in the Alaskan wilderness after a fearful journey in frail crafts across the frequently stormy seas of the North Pacific, the gentle hissing and warm glow radiating from the samovars must have cheered them during many a dark and lonely evening.

Barry’s booklet reveals how Alaskans looked to the samovar as a touchstone of their lingering Russian identity. After Alaska was purchased by the United States in 1867, demand for samovars in the newly acquired territory was so great that a company in San Francisco began to

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202 For a more detailed discussion of these and other twentieth-century memoirs, see my forthcoming article “Myth and Memory in Russian Tea Culture” in *Studies in Slavic Cultures VIII* (2009).
manufacture them for sale in Alaska. In the early decades of the twentieth century, the samovar was gradually relegated to the shelves of antique stores as a dusty curiosity and its role as an everyday household item languished along with Alaskans’ memories of their Russian heritage.

In 1967, however, the centennial celebration of the purchase of Alaska from Russia revived interest in the samovar as Alaskans sought to rediscover their historical links with Russia. “The samovar, freshly fueled with charcoal and filled with bubbling spiced tea or other exotic beverages, once more became the center of attraction on the serving table,” Barry writes. Ever the symbol of Russian hospitality, a few years later the samovar was even adopted as a marketing technique by Alaska Airlines when it launched its “Golden Samovar Service” advertising campaign in 1970. Timed to coincide with the introduction of charter service to Siberia, each flight featured hot tea served from a “Golden Samovar” by stewardesses dressed in Cossack uniforms.

How was the samovar transformed from an item of conspicuous consumption in the households of Russian aristocrats, to an everyday household utensil, to an advertising tool for an American airline? The answer lies in Russia’s turbulent nineteenth century, when cultural elites articulated a national identity that established hospitality and communalism as two of its central tenets. The samovar’s rise to prominence in the nineteenth century did not merely result from an inability or unwillingness to adapt or retain older traditions, but rather became an authentic Russian tradition in its own right. The tradition of Russian tea had to be “invented,” because neither the beverage nor its accoutrements originated in Russia; yet the samovar seemed to fit naturally into a repertoire of national symbols. The samovar was integrated very quickly and easily into Russian culture partially because the custom of enjoying hot beverages was hardly novel. Perhaps this, together with the opportunity for long conversation provided by the samovar, made it possible for a newly-introduced foreign object to be inserted seamlessly into Russian historical memory.

Russian tea traditions, like Russian culture more generally, display an interesting mixture of Eastern influences (the tea itself) and Western paraphernalia (the samovar). Today the samovar remains a ubiquitous symbol of Russian identity, and its image continues to signify a

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204 Ibid.
205 Cf. Hobsbawm, 5.
distinctively Russian type of community. The cover of a recent issue of *Russia Profile* magazine demonstrates that the samovar remains in force as a self-referential sign of Russianness. The April 2008 issue was compiled around the theme of the global Russian diaspora, and titled “The Ties that Bind.” The cover art features a large samovar, but no mention of samovars can be found anywhere in the publication. Clearly, those who produced this magazine—which like *Soviet Life* (now *Russian Life*) is written, edited, and published by Russians in Russia for an English-speaking readership—consider the samovar to be such a ubiquitous symbol of Russian identity, so universally recognizable, that no verbal explanation of its significance is deemed necessary. In much the same way, the 1971 article on “Russian tea” in *Soviet Life* featured multiple photographs of samovars, but did not mention the object once, further reinforcing its role as a powerful visual and semantic symbol of Russian identity.


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