

Jo Ann Ruckman. *The Moscow Business Elite: A Social and Cultural Portrait of Two Generations, 1840-1905*. DeKalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 1984

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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the family economy and avoided the starkness of workhouse existence by converting their homes into sweating dens as the "only way out of poverty." Not that sweating made many people rich: neither villains nor victims loom large in Schmiechen's account.

The first half of the book examines definitions and the causes of sweating. The term originated in the tailoring and shoemaking trades and involved primarily work performed in unregulated premises, usually a worker's home, where there was disregard for hours and condition of work and for quality of goods. A sweated worker would take goods from an employer's shop or factory and then work on them further as an outworker. The causes of sweating were manifold: Schmiechen lists the rise of foreign and provincial competition to the London clothing industries; the fall of the early trade unions and the end of the apprenticeship tradition; the development of technological innovations, particularly the sewing machine, which made many skilled jobs obsolete; "consumerism" in the new era of mass production and mass consumption, especially the new emphasis on clothing as "the mark of those who had moved into the realm of Victorian respectability"; and he looks too at the notion of an oversupply of labour, especially by the two bogeys of the trade unions of the end of the century: women and Jews. He is concerned to differentiate sweating from the preindustrial "putting-out" of the domestic system in textiles before the advent of the factories. He argues that at best, the relationship of the outwork system with the factory system was symbiotic; at its worst, it was "parasitic." While neatly describing the features he found, this does not tell us enough about the relative significance of its various causes.

The book's second half looks at the role of both the trade unions and the state in reducing sweating. Trade unions were unclear whether they should include sweated workers in their membership. Even when some unions tried to organise among sweaters, they were singularly unsuccessful, not only because the unions had no unified approach to women and Jews, both characterized as willing to take less pay and work in poorer conditions than male unionists. Mainly the unions failed to recruit because the work force was isolated and splintered, employment was casual, and many of the women carried also the double job of household work: widows and married women were more numerous, Schmiechen argues, than the official government statistics in Census returns and factory inspectors' reports suggest. It was not the trade unions, therefore, which effectively ended sweating.

State regulation achieved what trade unions could not. Schmiechen argues that in the late 1860s and 1870s the state, by its unenforced 1867 Workshop Act, "quite unwittingly" encouraged the growth of sweated labour by laying down too stringent requirements for employers to follow. The work therefore left the regulated factories and workshops and flowed into the sweating dens. A generation later, however, fortified by the shocked public opinion roused by the

1906 Daily News "Sweated Industries Exhibition," pressured by a newly formed National Anti-Sweating League, and bolstered by the arguments of a Conference on a Minimum Wage, the government in 1909 legislated a Trade Boards Act. This Act established wage boards, with employee representation, which fixed a minimum hourly wage for the quarter of a million workers in four general areas employing unskilled labour, including the tailoring trades. Schmiechen concludes that the resulting Trade Boards were important in protecting and raising wages before, during, and after World War I and then prevented wages from falling as fast as other wages in the early 1920s. Higher wages, Schmiechen argues, resulted in increased worker productivity, better employer organisation and production management, which in turn resulted in higher revenues, and "proved that sweated wages were not economically necessary." A happy ending: but the two pages allotted to discussion of this topic could well be expanded.

The book hints at the various reasons why sweating lasted — and indeed continues — as a feature of women's work in the needle trades. However, there is no clear analysis of cause and effect. Nor is there more than a fleeting reference to the role of sweating, and, by extension, of other unskilled, low paying work, in providing an alternative to a state welfare system in the alleviation of destitution.

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Jo Ann Ruckman. *The Moscow Business Elite: A Social and Cultural Portrait of Two Generations, 1840-1905*. DeKalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 1984.

A sudden flurry of publications has illuminated the problem of that missing Russian bourgeoisie which failed to transform Russia into a liberal democracy before World War I. Recent studies by Thomas C. Owen, *Capitalism and Politics in Russia: A Social History of the Moscow Merchants, 1855-1905* (1981); Alfred Rieber, *Merchants and Entrepreneurs in Imperial Russia* (1982); and, to some degree, William Gleason, *Alexander Guchkov and the End of the Russian Empire* (1983) have addressed the problem. They come to a similar conclusion, namely, that the Russian business and professional classes were too fragmented to cooperate against a monarchy which was, after all, serving many of them well by sponsoring economic nationalism. Rieber's and Owen's books, in particular, explore a common theme of the *soslovie* (estate) mentality which defined Russian merchant consciousness before the Revolution leading them to defer to the social and political superiors and adopt a defensive strategy to protect their wealth. As a result, the

Russian merchant failed to translate its riches and its key economic position into political power.

Unlike Owen and Rieber, Jo Ann Ruckman modestly provides “a social and cultural portrait of two generations” without exploring the general problem of Russian liberalism. Like Owen, she limits herself to Moscow, knowing that Petersburg’s proximity to the Imperial Court created a different (and as yet unexplored) set of characteristics; provincial business centres vary again. She uses newspapers and memoirs from the period to develop a convincing, if impressionistic, survey.

Ruckman credits the older generation of Moscow merchants with sobriety, thrift, and hard work and questions their reputation of being “bearded, patriarchal, semi-Asiatic . . . and fully versed in the arts of haggling and swindling” (Owen). Their success in amassing fortunes made them proud of their estate and almost as contemptuous of the spendthrift nobility as the nobility was of them. Moscow merchants shone within the self-appointed sphere of cultural and civil philanthropy despite their lack of education. The Tretyakov Art Gallery is only the most prominent example; it is worth noting that Tretyakov started collecting Russian art because it was cheaper than imported art. P.I. Shchukin also donated his immensely valuable collection of western art to the city. Other merchants built hospitals, established schools, and aided the handicapped as well as offering the traditional support to Moscow’s innumerable churches and to the poor.

A younger generation which emerged in the 1890s differed noticeably from its parent generation, not always for the better. Growing up in wealthy and cultured surroundings, the new generation was far better educated and took a more direct role in the creation of Russian culture as artists, musicians and *litterati*. The son of a wealthy merchant family, Alekseev-Stanislavsky, founded the world-famous Moscow Art Theatre while his patron, Savva Morozov, took personal charge of lighting and staging, to give one example. The younger generation integrated itself far more fully into national life while still maintaining successful business careers in the boom period at the turn of the century. Although some merchants innovatively assisted the workers

in their own factories, merchant philanthropy declined markedly in this generation.

Unlike the older generation of merchants who avoided both national politics and, when they could, municipal politics (with a few significant exceptions), the younger generation threw themselves into political life. Artists and *litterati* remained apathetic politically in tune with the prevailing aesthetic, but businessmen came to oppose the Tsarist autocracy and favour constitutional government. The merchants were motivated initially by business concerns, primarily the efforts of the government to intervene on behalf of factory workers through factory inspections and, eventually, through sponsorship of trade-unions organized by the secret police. During the 1905 Revolution, older merchants supported the autocracy while younger merchants formed political parties in the naive belief that they could win substantial voting support.

Like any book, this one has weaknesses and omissions. The absence of any quantitative data or other systematic method leaves the reader in doubt whether the anecdotal examples culled from newspapers and memoirs are typical. More material is needed on the size of the group, its wealth, and its relation to other estates. The distinction between a “social and cultural portrait,” on the one hand, and a political and economic portrait on the other remains somewhat artificial. Ruckman deals with the political and economic mentality of the merchants without sufficient depth.

Nevertheless, *The Moscow Business Elite* adds a useful dimension to our understanding of the Russian bourgeoisie before the Revolution. It confirms portraits presented elsewhere of an essentially apolitical group which entered late and ineffectually into politics. However, it shows them to have contributed far more to Russian culture and society than a purely political portrait would indicate.

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