

Myth and Memory in Russian Tea Culture

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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 sable skins as a token of his gratitude.

(*Soviet Life* 23)

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, Vasilii Starkov and Stepan Neverov, 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 [sic]” (Baddeley 118). Starkov and Neverov 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 the 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 (Baddeley 118-19). Not surprisingly, his protest went unheeded, and the envoys carried the “superfluous” tea back to the court at Moscow.¹ 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 beverage for one century. Only in the 1870s was it true that “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!” (qtd. in Smith and Christian 241).² 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 that country’s social and cultural life that even today most Russians believe their tea traditions 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 (1762-1796), roughly one million pounds of tea (consisting of loose and compressed “brick” tea) were imported into Russia each year (Smith and Christian 234).³ During this same period, Robert Smith estimates that if tea consumption was limited entirely to aristocratic families, only about one pound of leaf tea and one-fourth pound of sugar were available in Russia per person per year (Smith and Christian 234).⁴ Drinking tea, then, was a very expensive habit: in the 1780s, a Japanese sailor in Russia recorded that tea cost between one and five rubles per pound (Smith and Christian 234).⁵ The scarcity and high cost of tea limited its consumption to a small fraction of the Russian elite, who 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 the nineteenth century, the price of tea in Russia fell by half (Dix 24). In 1901, the same year the Trans-Siberian railway became active, 115 million pounds of tea entered Russia (Smith and Christian 236), and only then did the average annual tea consumption reach one pound per person (Dix 24).⁶ 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.⁷ Even so, 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 (Engel 711).⁸

Thus over the course of the nineteenth century, in Russia tea was transformed from an expensive luxury into a household necessity. More importantly for our purposes, Russian tea traditions, epitomized by the samovar, were burned into the popular memory in the nineteenth century, during a time when cultural elites were striving to articulate and codify Russian national identity. This was essentially a cultural process, wherein Russian writers, artists and other cultural figures strove to articulate the meaning of “Russianness” for popular audiences. 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 with any regularity, much less own a samovar, and their works seem to be largely responsible for installing tea next to vodka and *kvass* as a Russian “national drink.”⁹

The aim of this study is twofold: first, to sketch the process by which the distinctively Russian practices of *chaepitie* (tea-drinking) and *chaimichať* (to pass time by drinking tea) were “invented” during the nineteenth century thanks in part to four of Russia’s greatest writers, Pushkin, Dostoevskii, Tolstoi, and Chekhov. Given the crucial role of literature in Russian culture, poetry, novels, short stories and plays can be analyzed in search of clues to the nature of the national identity Russians created for themselves in the nineteenth century. James Billington has asserted that Russians looked to literature for prophecy rather than for entertainment (353). Similarly, literary artists, perhaps more than others, “bore a special responsibility to find the meaning of national identity” (329). Beginning with Pushkin, the great Russian literary figures of the nineteenth century helped virtually institutionalize the rituals, traditions and taboos surrounding tea drinking, thereby making them distinctively Russian. Although literature was only one of many avenues by which tea entered Russian culture, the writers whose works are examined here, despite their 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.

The second section of the paper traces how the legacy of *chaepitie*—by which I mean the distinctive rituals, beliefs and material objects that accumulated around tea consumption in Russia—outlasted the Imperial era in which it was created. Twentieth-century memoirs

and other literature reveal that in expatriates' memories of their homeland, the samovar continued to operate much as it had in the literary classics of the nineteenth century, that is, as a metaphor for Russian identity. In this case, invented traditions prove remarkably robust, which is perhaps not surprising given that the samovar was posited as a symbol of Russian identity during a time of massive and widespread cultural change. As Eric Hobsbawm notes, "[w]here the old ways are alive, traditions need neither be revived nor invented" (8). In the midst of unprecedented social and cultural transformation, Russians clung to the samovar as a symbol of the old culture that seemed to be passing away, and carried their tea traditions to such far-away places as China, England and the United States. Without disregarding the crucial differences between the Imperial and Soviet periods, this is an argument for cultural continuity. Ironically, the authors of the 1971 article in *Soviet Life* were quite correct in this regard: Russians really are great tea connoisseurs, and their traditions are well-established and distinctive—despite being only one century old.

The invention of “Russian tea” in nineteenth-century literature

Aleksander Pushkin traveled illegally to the Caucasus in 1829. A few years later, he revised his travel diary and published it as *A Journey to Arzrum* [*Puteshestvie v 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. 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, the Christian gospel (449). Here Pushkin reveals two types of influences he believed capable of bringing Russianness (which he equated with civilization) to these backward 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 (Smith and Christian 240). 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 Russian. Considering his stature as 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.

In praising such a late introduction into Russia, Pushkin exemplifies the Europhilia of the Russian elites during his lifetime, yet paradoxically, before Pushkin there was no Russian national literature (Figs 49). 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" (197).¹⁰ Pushkin's poetry is 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.

By Pushkin's time, in Russia as in England, the daily routine (at least for the aristocracy) included afternoon tea:

Люблю я час
Определять обедом, чаем
И ужином. (*Evgenii Onegin* 113)¹¹

Another famous passage from *Evgenii Onegin* [*Eugene Onegin*] (1830) helped to establish evening tea as virtually obligatory as well:

Смеркалось; на столе, блистая,
Шипел вечерний самовар,
Китайский чайник нагревая;
Под ним клубился легкий пар.
Разлитый Ольгиной рукою,
По чашкам темною струею
Уже душистый чай бежал,
И сливки мальчик подавал... (*Evgenii Onegin* 70)¹²

Joyce Toomre, who edited the English edition of the famous Russian cookbook *A Gift to Young Housewives*, 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” (Toomre 17). Compare Pushkin’s stanza above with these lines from William 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,
That cheer but not inebriate, wait on each,
So let us welcome peaceful evening in. (869-70)

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.

The works of Dostoevskii, Tolstoi, and Chekhov demonstrate that by the middle of the nineteenth century, Russian tea ways were already quite well-developed and widespread. Though these artists 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, “пыхтя как самовар” (Dostoevskii, *Безы* [*The Devils*] 120);¹³ a countess is nicknamed “Samovar” because she is always “обо всем волнуется и горячится” (Tolstoi, *Anna Karenina* 129);¹⁴ a peasant quips that samovars, “как и всё в мире,” eventually go out (Dostoevskii, *Безы* 207).¹⁵ 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 Dostoevskii, tea drinking was no longer restricted to the upper classes, and the samovar had become a symbol of familial intimacy and belonging. A character of his *Bednye liudi* [*Poor Folk*] (1845) expresses her loneliness at boarding school, and her longing for home as embodied in the family samovar:

Об самой пустой вещи в доме, и о той с удовольствием
вспоминаешь. Думаешь-думаешь: вот как бы хорошо
теперь было дома! Сидела бы я в маленькой комнатке

нашей, у самовара, вместе с нашими; было бы так тепло, хорошо, знакомо. Как бы, думаешь, обняла теперь матушку, крепко-крепко, горячо-горячо! Думаешь-думаешь, да и заплачешь тихонько с тоски, давя в груди слезы, нейдут на ум вокабулы. (98)¹⁶

In a similarly themed passage, Razumikhin of *Prestuplenie i nakazanie* [*Crime and Punishment*] (1866) describes his conception of marital bliss and what he calls the “feather-bed principle”:

Тут втягивает; тут конец свету, ярость, тихое пристанище, пуп земли, трехрыбное основание мира, эссенция блинов, жирных кулебяк, вечернего самовара, тихих воздыханий и теплых кацавеек, натопленных лежанок, — ну, вот точно ты умер, а в то же время и жив, обе выгоды разом! (161)¹⁷

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 hominess, the great Russian stove. Few scenes could be more stereotypically (and nostalgically) Russian than the following passage from *Bednye ljudi*:

Утром встанешь свежа, как цветочек. Посмотришь в окно: морозом прохвалито все поле; тонкий, осенний иней повис на обнаженных сучьях; тонким, как лист, льдом подернулось озеро; встает белый пар по озеру; кричат веселые птицы. Солнце светит кругом яркими лучами, и лучи разбивают как стекло тонкий лед. Светло, ярко, весело! В печке опять трещит огонь; подсядем все в самовару...Мужичок проедет мимо окон на бодрой лошадке в лес за дровами. Все так довольны, так веселы! (175)¹⁸

In this passage, Dostoevskii includes the samovar in a group of familiar Russian symbols, including snow, *muzhiki* (peasants), horse-drawn sleighs, and wood. The samovar is a central symbol of family closeness and idyllic childhood in Dostoevskii’s fiction; to share tea is to share life and human affection. In these passages Dostoevskii create 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 Underground Man proclaims, “Я скажу, что свету провалиться, а чтоб мне чай всегда пить” (*Zapiski iz podpol'ia* 174).¹⁹

In the epilogue to *Prestuplenie i nakazanie*, Raskol'nikov becomes indifferent to life, to Sonia, even to the news of his mother's death; he accepts his fate without question. Sonia writes home:

К пице почти равнодушен, но что эта пища, кроме воскресных и праздничных дней, так дурна, что наконец он с охотой принял от нее, Сони, несколько денег, чтобы завести у себя ежедневный чай; насчет всего же остального просилее не беспокоиться, уверняя, что все эти заботы о нем только досаждают ему. (415-16)²⁰

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. "Оно, знаете ли," Makar Alekseevich writes to his dear Varvara, "родная моя, чаю не пить как-то стыдно. Ради чужих и пьешь его, Варенка, для вида, для тона; а по мне все равно, я не прихотлив" (*Bednye Ljudi* 83).²¹ 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 ("так грязно и так неприлично" [*Prestuplenie i nakazanie* 164]), which is shameful to the ladies. In *Idiot*, 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 (435-436). Similarly, Dostoevskii's characters are often mortified at being caught without a samovar by an unexpected guest. In *Бесы*, 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 Kirillov's for a samovar (435-6).

In Dostoevskii's fiction, social drinking does not involve just alcohol. His 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" (2).

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 (Betha 185).²² Despite the ideological chasm between them, Tolstoi also uses tea- and samovar-

related imagery to great effect in his fiction. With the publication in 1852 of his very first work of fiction, *Detstvo. Otrochestvo. Iunost'* [*Childhood. Boyhood. Youth.*], 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 *Detstvo*, 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. (57)

By marking key scenes and transitions with samovars, Tolstoi also included tea and the samovar in popular conceptions of Russian childhood. In Tolstoi's *Detstvo. Otrochestvo. Iunost'*, the protagonist's mother, whom he adores and idealizes, appears for the first time in the novel bent over the samovar:

Матушка сидела в гостиной и разливала чай; одной рукой она придерживала чайник, другою—кран самовара, из которого вода текла через верх чайника на поднос. Но хотя она смотрела пристально, она не замечала этого, не замечала и того, что мы вошли. (*Detstvo* 22)²³

The narrator, Nikolen'ka 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" (49). For Nikolen'ka, both his mother and the samovar are sources of seemingly endless warmth and comfort (recalling Dostoevskii's close association between the samovar and family life).

A samovar also marks Nikolen'ka's, and the novel's, transition from childhood to boyhood. Nikolen'ka's mother's death takes place at the very end of *Detstvo*, and the first two pages of *Otrochestvo* find Nikolen'ka describing the scene of another departure from the family's country home:

В сенях уже кипит самовар, который раскрасневшись, как рак, раздувает Митька-форейтор; на дрове сыро и

туманно, как будто пар подымается от пахучего навоза; солнышко веселым, ярким светом освещает восточную част неба и соломенные крыши просторных навесов, окружающих двор, глянцевитые от росы, покрывающей их. (*Detstvo* 126)²⁴

Thus in Tolstoi's *Detstvo. Otrochestvo. Iunost'*, which played such an important role 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.

On a grander scale, Tolstoi's *Voina i mir* [*War and Peace*] (1869) is a paradigmatic example of the drive to understand and articulate Russian national identity. Orlando Figes writes that works like *Voina i mir* 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" (xxvii). 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. Pierre's first encounter with higher order masonry takes place against the gentle hissing of a midnight samovar at a remote posting station (*War and Peace* trans. Edmonds, 408). 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 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 (*War and Peace* trans. Edmonds, 1095).

The very first mention of a samovar in *Voina i mir* accompanies the first appearance of Princess Liza (Lise) Bolkonskaia, who has been married the previous winter to Prince Andrei Bolkonskii, and is pregnant with her first child. Lise appears at the soirée in the opening scene of the novel, winning over everyone present with her charming appearance and manners. She chooses a seat near the silver samovar, thereby associating herself with the refinement it represents (*War and Peace* trans. Edmonds 9). 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 trau-

matic for the princess, and she dies in childbirth, the victim of her husband's cruelty and selfish ambition.

By contrast, Sonia, a young, dowerless relation of the Rostovs, has an organic connection to the peasantry. Sonia inhabits a more authentically Russian world, and rather than fall victim to the sort of oppressive marriage Lise experienced, Sonia 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, Sonia embodies the humble, pure, self-sacrificial Russia that was Tolstoi's ideal. The very end of *Voina i mir* finds all the main characters gathered for tea at Bald Hills, the Bolkonskii country estate:

За чай вокруг круглого стола и самовара, у которого сидела Соня, собирались все взрослые члены семейства. Дети, гувернеры и гувернантки уже отпили чай, и голоса их слышались в соседней диванной. За чаем все сидели на обычных местах... (*Voina i mir* 312).²⁵

In this scene, the denouement of the novel, it is Sonia'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 Sonia and samovars in the novel. Thus at the very beginning of *Voina i mir*, 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, Sonia, 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.

In stark contrast to Dostoevskii and Tolstoi, Anton Chekhov “was the first major Russian writer to emerge from the penny press” (Figs 206). Moreover, unlike these literary giants, “Chekhov is remarkably free of the didacticism so prevalent in Russian literature before and after him (in this he is akin to Pushkin)” (Bethea 187). Chekhov stood on the cusp of Russian modernism. As a student in Moscow, and later as a doctor in its slums, Chekhov was well acquainted with folk culture and street life (Figs 206). In his writings, we find that the folklore surrounding tea was deeply engrained enough to weather Russia's troubled transition to the twentieth century. 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 "Imeniny" ["The Name-Day Party"] (1888), an annoying guest thinks he is impressing everyone with his clever impersonation of a merchant. The "young humorist," as the narrator calls him, puts on his act assuming that tea habits could be indicative of social class (186). Elsewhere in Chekhov's short stories and plays, a buzzing or humming sound (*gud*) occasionally made by the samovar is considered an evil omen.²⁶ A character in *Ivanov* (1887) states, "Человек, братец ты мой, все равно что самовар. Не все он стоит в холодке на полке, но, бывает, и угольки него кладут: пш... пш..." (262).²⁷ 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.²⁸

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 long and tedious ("Ubiistvo" ["Murder"] 150). Characters often make statements like, "Вот и теперь. Самовар уже два часа на столе, а они гулять пошли" (*Diadia Vania* 66).²⁹ Another reflects ruefully: "Я знал, что самовар ставить целый час, что дедушка будет пить чай не менее часа и потом ляжет спать часа на два, на три, что у меня четверть дня уйдет на ожидание..." ("Krasavitsy" 160).³⁰ 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 Pushkin, Dostoevskii, and Tolstoi helped 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 used aphorisms about samovars on a daily basis. In this way, Chekhov's drama and fiction document the ubiquity of tea and samovars in Russian daily life. Despite the radical changes facing Russian society in the early twentieth century, Russian tea culture displays a remarkable amount of continuity. The nineteenth century writers examined here established for their contemporaries and for later generations that in a rapidly changing world, the samovar

signified home, family, community, warmth, *byt* (everyday life)—all of a timeless, distinctively Russian type. Russians in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had to look no further than Pushkin, the first and greatest Russian national poet, to see that the samovar symbolized of Russian identity. It is not difficult to see how readers of Pushkin, Dostoevskii, Tolstoi, Chekhov and others assumed these writers were articulating the meaning of much older traditions, rather than participating in their invention. By the advent of the twentieth century, Russian collective memories of tea were somewhat myopic, because of the incorrect belief that the samovar was a very old and uniquely Russian phenomenon. At the same time, the myth of “Russian tea,” embodied in the samovar, had become an authentic Russian tradition in its own right, as this next section will demonstrate.

The samovar in memories of twentieth-century Russia

“My first memory is of tea,” Elizavetta Dmitrovna wrote in the mid-1940s, “—four o’clock tea when the samovar is brought in and put on the side table, and the big table is laden [sic] with butter-bread, jam, sausages, cheese, honey, and cake” (vii). For Dmitrovna, as for Nikolen’ka in Tolstoi’s *Detstvo*, memories of a Russian childhood are incomplete without the samovar. Such nostalgic memories of home are typical of the writings of Russians who emigrated during the twentieth century. Dmitrovna had married an American soldier and lived with him in Shanghai until he was interned by the Japanese during World War II. During her husband’s captivity, she returned to his home in Virginia, but not without her precious samovar. Dmitrovna recalls:

The samovar on the cover is my own, brought from Russia. When it was packed in China, there was a tiny silver bird in a miniature cage—so small that everybody wondered how anything so delicate could be made; the cage hung from the vent and when the water boiled, the little bird sang. But it did not arrive with the samovar in America. (viii)

The theft of the tiny bird-shaped whistle on Dmitrovna’s samovar serves as a sad metaphor for the life she left behind in Russia. Her book, *Samovar: a Russian Cook Book; Famous Recipes of Old Russia Adapted to American Kitchens*, was her way of recapturing and adapting her Russian identity in her new country. Aside from the introduction, no mention of tea or the samovar is made in the 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* (viii).

Dmitrovna cannot help but spend half her introduction recalling warm memories of tea time in her native Russia. After describing in detail the preparation and service of tea with a samovar, she expounds warmly on the centrality of tea in Russian daily life:

Russian tea is not like American tea—and how I long for good Russian tea! Chinese tea is refined in Russia. It is served with sugar, lemon, and a dash of rum. Instead of sugar we often use jam to sweeten tea—rose leaf jam or strawberry being favorites. Little children like it this way, without the rum, of course. We drink tea for all meals and drink it especially at four o'clock as it is a long time between one o'clock lunch or dinner and eight o'clock dinner or supper, the type of meal depending on locality and occupation.

Every railway station in Russia provides a tank of boiling water with a spigot, just as American stations provide drinking fountains. Russians always travel with their tea pots so that they can brew tea at every station to drink with their lunches [...] (viii)

For Dmitrovna, the ritual of afternoon tea was central to memories of her home, and there was no symbol of Russian life more potent than the samovar. Having lived 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 Russian identity across time and space.

The same was true for Alexander Poliakov, son of the famous inventor Joseph Poliakov, who fled the Soviet Union for England after the 1917 Revolution. Poliakov's 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," Poliakov 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" (vii). For Poliakov, 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.

Before the Revolution, the Poliakovs lived in an immacu-

lately appointed flat on Manezh Square, across from the Moscow Kremlin. Although he was only seven years old in October 1917, Poliakov vividly remembered the room in which his family gathered to wait out the shooting, and particularly the silver samovar prominently displayed on a small table. Later, when the family had moved to their dacha, Poliakov recalls: "In the first six months, we were not hungry. Even when the money was finished, we could barter with peasants, exchanging silverware, clothes and household utensils. Our silver samovar kept us going for some time. But soon the peasants around Moscow had nothing to spare and the family went through a very hungry period [...]" (43). It is not clear exactly what Poliakov means when he writes of the samovar "keeping us going for some time." Possibly the caffeine in the tea helped ward off hunger, or the Poliakovs simply drew encouragement from the samovar's everyday warmth and comfort. A third possibility is that the samovar, which provided an almost endless supply of tea for the peasants who had come to barter, helped the Poliakovs gain bargaining power. Poliakov does mention that "[a]s many as twelve [peasants] at a time came to drink tea" (38). However we interpret this passage, Poliakov remembered the samovar as the center of a warm household in a cold and hostile environment (both literally and figuratively); it also seems to have served as something of a social equalizer.

Aside from the passages mentioned above, Poliakov's memoir contains few references to samovars. Nor does the author feel the need to expound on his reasons for titling his reminiscences *The Silver Samovar*. Clearly Poliakov considered the samovar to be such a universally recognized symbol of Russia that he felt no need to articulate the connection between the title and subtitle of his book. Despite his many years in England, Poliakov concludes his memoirs by asserting: "But I still consider myself a Russian. We all do. One's childhood and boyhood cannot be written off, nor can one's parents... We keep up the Russian identity with a vengeance" (140). In these the last sentences of his book, which he completed in 1994, Alexander Poliakov considered his identity coequal with his memories of Russia, and at the center of both stood his family's silver samovar.

Even those of non-Russian origin held onto the samovar as a symbol of Russian sociability. For the Englishwoman Moira Clark, the samovar served as a conduit between her own world and that of Revolutionary Russia, where her grandmother had served as a governess in an aristocratic household. Throughout the volume the samovar

functions as a vehicle which transports Clark back into her grandmother's memories of life in Russia. In the prologue, Clark uses her own childhood memories to reflect on her fascination with her grandmother's life in Russia, symbolized by her grandmother's samovar:

Staring with unseeing eyes into the glowing embers, I found myself in a strange but somehow familiar sitting room looking down at a child. The child was gazing at a silver samovar. She then drifted to a picture hanging on the wall opposite. Touching it lightly she looked back to the samovar and sighed. As I watched entranced, the child curtsied to an invisible partner, gathered her cotton skirt in one hand and began to dance. There was a seriousness about the dancing and as she swept past the picture on the wall, she gently touched the frame. Coming to an abrupt halt in front of the gleaming samovar, the child stared into it but only her own face looked back, distorted by the curvature of the vessel. What was she expecting to see in the samovar? Who was this child? Why did I feel connected to this unreal world? (1)

Reflected in the shining surface of her grandmother's samovar, history for Clark is a deeply personal matter, expressed in her questions about who the child was and what she expected to see in the samovar. *Reflections in the Samovar* is Clark's attempt to discover her own identity by telling her grandmother's story.

"The silver samovar and the picture of an elegant lady in a long dress had haunted me from my earliest days," Clark writes (1). Throughout her book, she uses the samovar as an operative metaphor for Russian history and society, comparing the social and political situation to a samovar, which gradually heats the water until it begins to boil noisily. Chapter four is entitled "The Samovar Begins to Boil," and recounts how Clark's grandmother, Jean, took up her position as a governess in St. Petersburg just before the Revolution. The chapter opens:

Is it possible to see more than one's reflection in shining silver? Once, long after the dancing child of six years old had imagined her royal partner, I thought I had detected something disturbing when looking intently into the shining samovar. Perhaps it was my vivid imagination playing tricks again. Or perhaps that vessel did have its own story to tell. After all, it too had been through the Revolution and survived. Whatever the cause of those imaginings, the samovar led me

deeper and deeper into the turbulent years which were to herald the start of revolution in Russia. (Clark 22)

For Clark, the samovar is both a witness to historical events with a memory of its own, and acts as a gateway for accessing that history.

By chapter six, “The Samovar Boils,” Jean had fled to Odessa with her employers, the Sollohub family. The chapter opens with a description of the centrality of tea in Russian social life: “One of the most important customs in Russian life is the making and drinking of tea. The samovar was the centre of the household, the symbol of relaxation and well-being” (Clark 35). Again, in times of great uncertainty, social upheaval and physical displacement, the samovar remained an almost immutable physical and symbolic anchor in the home. When Jean eventually fled Odessa for her native England, she grabbed the samovar in her haste and left all her important documents behind. Decades later, memories of that same samovar would send Jean’s granddaughter on a quest to discover the connection between Russian history, memory and her own identity.

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 at the beginning of this essay, Mary Jane Barry typed up her hand-illustrated booklet entitled *The Samovar: Its History and Use*. Although she is not of Russian extraction, Barry writes that the “love story” between herself and samovars “started in the 1930s with my first sight of a bent and tarnished, but still intriguing Russian-Alaskan samovar in the cluttered old jewelry shop of Carl Orlander in Seward, Alaska” (3). Many samovars passed through the doors of Barry’s own 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 4)

Barry’s booklet reveals how Alaskans looked to the samovar as a touchstone of their Russian identity. After Alaska was purchased by

the United States, demand for samovars there was so great that a company in San Francisco began to 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. In 1967, however, the centennial celebration of the purchase of Alaska from Russia revived interest in the samovar as Alaskans sought to rediscover their Russian heritage. "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 5). Ever the symbol of Russian hospitality, the samovar was even adopted as a marketing technique by Alaska Airlines when it launched its "Golden Samovar Service" advertising campaign in the late 1960s. Each flight featured hot tea served from a "Golden Samovar" by stewardesses dressed in Cossack uniforms (Barry 6).

For Dmitrovna, Poliakoff, Clark, Barry and countless others outside Russia, the samovar embodied the land and traditions left behind. "[W]herever Russians go," Dmitrovna wrote, "they take their religion, traditions, and their recipes, although they may adapt the latter to the ingredients that are obtainable in the countries in which they must live" (vii). The samovar served as a remarkably adaptable cultural anchor in times of change and displacement, just as it had when it was established as a national symbol in the nineteenth century. For these twentieth-century writers, the Russianness of the samovar was no longer invented, but authentic and seemingly timeless.

Conclusion

How was the samovar transformed from an item of conspicuous consumption in the households of Russian ruling elites, to an everyday household utensil, to an advertising tool for an American airline? The answer to this question 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. Though all the writers discussed above had somewhat divergent ideas about the meaning of Russian identity, each of them used the samovar as a metaphor for Russian culture and sociability. The samovar was integrated very quickly and easily into Russian culture partially because Russians had been brewing hot plant-derived drinks for centuries. 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.

Moreover, in the face of rapid modernization, social transformation and the decline of old Russian culture, invented traditions like “Russian tea” and samovar lore proliferated. As older ways of life began to fade, the samovar filled a niche in Russian culture. Hobsbawm observes, “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” (4). Thus samovar lore seems in part to have been a response to the gradual waning of old Russian folkways. We have seen how samovars acquired all sorts of powerful emotional associations in the Russian imagination, and yet 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” (Hobsbawm 10-11). As Hobsbawm has theorized, in the case of Russian tea culture, the symbolically charged signs of community membership were more important than any ideology or agenda the community may or may not have propagated. The significance of tea drinking, epitomized by the samovar, “lay precisely in [its] undefined universality” (Hobsbawm 11).

Over the course of the nineteenth century, Pushkin, Dostoevskii, Tolstoi, Chekhov and other cultural figures 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 Russian 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” (18-19). In Russian nineteenth-century literature as well as twentieth century memoirs, the samovar was both sign and signified, a self-referential symbol pointing to and embodying some otherwise inexpressible essence of Russian identity.

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 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 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 in Russian memory.

Notes

1. I have found no reference to the gift the Tsar supposedly sent in return.
2. To date, Smith and Christian’s 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 in Russia.
3. For the sake of comparison, in 1786 the British consumed around 12.5 million pounds of tea (Pettigrew 40).
4. By contrast, one English family of six consumed about 100 pounds of sugar in 1797—about 17 pounds per person (Mintz 116).
5. 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 (Glants and Toomre 38).
6. Dix also notes that in 1900 annual tea consumption in Great Britain was seven times that amount.
7. 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.
8. See also note 60, p. 715. The very fact Engel places protests over a lack of sugar for workers’ tea into the category of “subsistence riots” evinces the perceived necessity of tea as an everyday household commodity.
9. On tea as a Russian national drink, see Hellberg-Hirn 158. Maurice Barling, by contrast, posits tea and *kvass*, rather than tea and vodka, as the two Russian national drinks (58). Graham Dix also insists that *kvass*, rather than tea, was “clearly the national beverage,” yet concedes that “the samovar and tea-drinking are associated with what is quintessen-

tially Russian in the popular view” (21). 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 (104).

10. Emphasis mine.
11. [I love to define / Time by dinner, tea, / and supper.] Trans. Falen, 78.
12. [‘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.] Trans. Falen, 78.
13. [...puffing like a samovar...] Trans. Magarshack, *The Devils* 159.
14. [“the little samovar” because she is always “getting heated and boiling over about something”] Trans. Louise and Aylmer Maude, 106.
15. [like everything in this world] Trans. Magarshack, *The Devils* 268.
16. [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.] Trans. McDuff, *Poor Folk* 22.
17. [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*, of juicy *kulebiakis*, 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!]
18. [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 *muzbik* would ride by on his best horse, on his way into the woods to gather firewood. Everyone was so pleased, so happy!] Trans. McDuff, *Poor Folk* 97.
19. [I say let the world fall to pieces so long as I can continue to drink tea.] Trans. Ginsburg, 143.
20. [That as to the 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.] Trans. McDuff, *Crime and Punishment* 620.
21. [You know, my darling, it is rather embarrassing not to be able to afford to drink tea; the people here are all well-off, so one feels embarrassed. Varenka, one drinks tea for the sake of others, for form's sake, in order to keep up appearances; for myself I couldn't care less, I'm not fussy.] Trans. McDuff, *Poor Folk* 7.
 22. Critics who consider Dostoevskii and Tolstoi to be "opposites" include Dimitrii Merezhkovskii and George Steiner.
 23. [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.] Trans. Alexandra and Sverre Lyngstad, 8.
 24. [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.] Trans. Alexandra and Sverre Lyngstad, 110.
 25. [All the adult members of the family were gathered about the round table at which Sonia presided 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...] Trans. Edmonds, 1382-83.
 26. In "Moia zhizn'," for example, Karповна wails: "Самовар-то гудел поутру, гуде-ел! Ох, не к добру, сердечные, не к добру!" (270). ["The samovar was humming this morning, hu-umming! It bodes no good, dears, it bodes no good!"] See also "The Dependents," "Three Years," and "The Cherry Orchard."
 27. [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] Trans. Hingley, 204.
 28. See "A Troublesome Visitor."
 29. [And now look what they've done. Two hours that samovar's been on the table, and they've gone for a walk.] Trans. Hingley, 21.
 30. [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...] Trans. Chertok and Gardner, 112.

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