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CLOTHES MAKE THE COMRADE: A HISTORY OF THE RUSSIAN FASHION INDUSTRY*

A central concern of Reginald Zelnik's scholarship has been an analysis of the emergence of a modern social group, the Russian working class. In his pathbreaking book, Labor and Society in Tsarist Russia: The Factory Workers of St. Petersburg, 1855-1870, Zelnik provided the first comprehensive account of the rise of labor and the labor question, examining both the changes in workers' lives as well as the government's and society's response to these new workers. Since the publication of Labor and Society, Zelnik has taken his study of the working class a step further by examining the social psychology of the various individuals who identified themselves as workers. Not content with providing an understanding of working conditions or government policy toward workers, he has tried to explain how workers came to identify themselves as members of this new class, or in other words, how workers became "conscious." The development of a new class consciousness was a difficult and ambiguous process. Writing about Semen Kanatchikov, a worker who described his painful journey from peasant to revolutionary worker, Zelnik points out: "Almost every challenge of urban life—the acquisition of skills, the mastery of reading, the discovery of fashionable dress and respectable forms of social life, the first hesitant steps into the dangerous world of radical politics—is seen in the light of its power to divest young Senka of his peasant identity and recast him as an urban worker."1

In order to understand this complex metamorphosis, Zelnik has argued that historians must come to understand as fully as possible both the material and cultural world in which workers struggled to survive. And, more importantly, this methodology for understanding the creation of modern social identities can be used for understanding not just workers but all social groups.

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In his memoirs, Kanatchikov identified the beginning of his “dandy” period: “My struggle against ‘human injustice’ in no way prevented me from becoming more accomplished in the ‘worldly’ social graces. . . . I no longer experienced any financial needs. I had bought myself a holiday ‘outfit,’ a watch, and, for the summer, a wide belt, gray trousers, a straw hat, and a pair of fancy shoes. In a word, I dressed myself up in the manner of those young urban metalworkers of that period who earned an independent living and didn’t ruin themselves with vodka.”2 In this brief passage, Kanatchikov reveals a profound change in his self-representation. Giving up his peasant clothes, he adopted the “uniform” of his co-workers and identifies himself with them. But at the same time, Kanatchikov was also removing markers of his Russian national identity in favor of Western-style clothes which made him feel more “worldly” or modern. It was this process of giving up traditional Russian dress for Western-style clothing which marked the great sartorial shift in Russian history and was a fundamental aspect of the Russian government’s modernization drive. In order to become modern, the government insisted that Russians give up their caftans, kokoshki and sarafans in exchange for crinolines, corsets and business suits.

Although a number of Western and Soviet historians have written about some of the challenges of urban life—acquisition of skills, the mastery of reading, and radical politics3—no one has yet analyzed the discovery of fashionable dress by Russians and how it shaped their cultural and social identity. The purpose of my essay is to correct this oversight by examining the ways in which a study of fashion can help us to understand the metamorphosis of not just Russian workers, but all Russians. Because fashion can represent simultaneously contradictory messages of class, gender and nationality, changes in fashion serve as important guideposts in understanding complex social and cultural transformations.4

2. Ibid., 11.