

## Notes and News

### COLLAPSE OF EMPIRE AND MATERIAL-CULTURE CHANGE: THE CASE OF THE SOVIET UNION

After the collapse of the Communist system in 1991, the monocultural but multi-ethnic Soviet Union fragmented into a series of smaller, 'ethnic' states which have since gone their own cultural and economic ways. Since then, there has been a rapid and dramatic change in material culture in Russia (and other successor states) which is continuing apace. This case provides food for thought on the potential and pitfalls of archaeological interpretations of profound material-culture change in the wake of empire collapse. The following observations were made between 1993 and 1999 in Russia, and compared with observations made in the Soviet Union in the late 1970s and around 1980. In both periods, this included the capital, Moscow, as well as provincial towns and rural areas in the Ukraine (in Soviet times) and the North Caucasus (in the post-Soviet period).

Since 1991, native goods and clothes have been replaced by western imports and copies in a surprisingly short time. Shell suits and sneakers by western manufacturers (and their numerous counterfeits by Asian producers) have become as typical as they are in western countries. Dress shows up the most obvious age and gender differentiation in the process, with youths and younger adults being the most 'westernized', and old women and very young girls the most 'traditional'. There is also an interesting seasonal element involved: in winter, Russians are reverting to 'native' styles of warm clothing.

Most consumer goods that might survive in the archaeological record are no longer Russian or Soviet, but of West European, American, Japanese or Turkish origin: plastic bags, chocolate wrappers, beer bottles, coffee tins, soap containers, telephones, photocopiers, computers, toys, and above all, cars. By 1998, foreign-made cars accounted for about 40% of the rolling traffic in Moscow, but this proportion drops to below 10% in rural areas of the more distant regions (such as the North Caucasus). Should future archaeologists look for an interpretation of this dramatic change in material culture, the suggestion of a population change involving massive immigration from the west, south and east, combined with native survival on the periphery, might be an arguable hypothesis.

Such an interpretation would appear to be corroborated by the observation of an extensive change in settlement patterns. One of the first laws to be repealed in Russia after the 1991 collapse was the limitation of sizes and uses of dachas (small buildings in the countryside, ranging from garden huts to summer houses). Before 1991, the maximum interior size of a dacha was 3 × 4 m; it was limited to a single floor; and it had to be without heating, thus preventing occupation all year round. Since the repeal, there has been an unregulated boom in dacha building on garden plots and greenfield areas outside all Russian towns, leading to the emergence of immense suburbs with permanently occupied family homes. This settlement type is a new feature in Russia, filling the gap between Soviet-style towns with huge estates of concrete-built blocks of flats, and Russian villages with small, often wooden buildings. The new suburbs also contain new types of houses the plans for some of which appear to have been inspired by western TV programmes (in

particular American soap operas), although more recently the work of western architects and new 'native' designs have become apparent.

There is another building boom going on: the refurbishment or construction of religious buildings. Again, this has introduced new types of construction, such as the use of corrugated iron for entire churches and mosques in the North Caucasus (and probably elsewhere). The contrast between this new phase of church and mosque building and the previous phase of neglect and profane use of religious buildings will undoubtedly lead future archaeologists to infer (correctly, of course) a sudden ideological change on a massive scale.

The collapse of the Soviet heavy industry has produced a horizon of deserted factories and other industrial sites which is a powerful indicator of the economic change that is indeed under way. But in what way would the extensive use of the US dollar (for a while even the official second currency) impinge on the archaeological record? Because of the economic uncertainty and the inflation rate of the rouble, and because Russians do not trust the new banks, savings are kept in US dollars at home. The archaeological result might be an extensive horizon of 'hoards' in dollars, not in new roubles.

On top of all this, the new material culture appears to signal a linguistic and symbolic change. There are western-style (or supposedly western) shop names throughout Russia now: *Supermarket, Shop, Fast Food, Video & Audio*, and so on, and there is at least one kiosk chain called *Foodstar*. These names are in Latin script even though the majority of the Russian population is not able to read them — they get only the symbolic message of the availability of western consumer goods. This process has become so endemic that in 1997 such names were banned in the capital by the mayor of Moscow, leading to the use of western names in Cyrillic transcription.

Logos and slogans on clothing (T-shirts, sweatshirts, anoraks, shell suits, peaked caps, shoes, etc.), bags and containers are almost exclusively in western style and Latin script. In 1993, a mere two years after the political change, I saw in Moscow only one dress item with a clearly Soviet symbol (an anorak with a hammer-and-sickle badge) and only one portable container with an inscription in native script (a shoulder bag with the small Cyrillic logo *СПОРТ*, i.e. 'sport'), over a period of two days during which I looked out specifically for such evidence. At that time, rural areas were still insufficiently supplied with western consumer goods, and I noted a number of locally made products imitating western style in native interpretation, including errors and misspellings in English-language logos. A typical case was a jumper with the prominent logo *ADVANTAGE COLLECЧEN* (the Russian *Ч* is pronounced like the *ch* in English 'church') seen in a small town in the North Caucasus. In the meantime, such copies seem have been largely replaced by western originals or mass-produced counterfeits. Since 1997, Russian logos in Cyrillic script have reappeared, but only very slowly, and with some signs of hybridization (e.g. Russian logos in Latin script).

If material-culture items were the only evidence to go by, it might be difficult to distinguish this change in the symbolic system from real language change. Archaeologists investigating this period would be faced with other problems. A really difficult one, with implications for interpretation, would be recognizing the chronological overlap of old and new material. Typological dating of 'native' artefacts and 'old' settlements would probably assign them to the Soviet period, in contrast to the 'intrusive' styles of the post-Soviet period. The formation of the archaeological record would also reinforce the impression of the massive scale of change: western goods tend to be heavily packaged, producing a lot of rubbish, whereas Russian goods are predominantly foodstuffs sold without branded containers or in re-usable containers (such as glass jars, clear plastic bags etc.).

Apart from material-culture change, the Soviet case also provides relevant evidence for other consequences of cataclysmic political and social change. One of these has been

increased mobility, with late- and post-Soviet emigration to Germany and Israel totalling almost three million.<sup>1</sup> Population decline is another aspect that has often been suggested, or speculated about, in connection with empire collapse. The countries of the former 'Soviet Empire' provide concrete data to model such population decline. The most notable observation is the steep decline in the birth rate right across eastern Europe since 1990, even in East Germany during and after its comparatively well-cushioned collapse. Thus, psychology may play as big a role as violence, health and nutrition; in Russia, all of these factors are at work together. As a result, the Russian birth rate has plummeted to 8.9 children per year and thousand of population by 1997 and is still falling, while the death rate has risen to 14.3, leading to an annual loss of 800,000.<sup>2</sup>

The collapse of the Soviet Union cannot be an exact analogy for the end of the Western Roman Empire, nor of any other empire of the pre-industrial age. In the 1990s, modern communications and bulk transport have provided conditions for the rapid dissemination of ideas and goods which are totally different from the 5th-century situation in which the spread of ideas relied largely on direct contact, and the spread of material culture on ox carts and large rowing boats (or, at best, small sailing boats). In other words the dissemination of cultural role models and consumer goods, which in present-day Russia is achieved by modern media and aggressive marketing, would in the post-Roman period have required rather more time, and movement of many more people. Also, the hard economic motives behind the large-scale export of western goods to Russia and other parts of eastern Europe cannot be assumed to have been the key factor behind the spread of Germanic material culture into some of the former provinces of the Western Roman Empire, again supporting the case for a much greater role of mobility of people in the post-Roman period.

The reasons for the acceptance of the intrusive, new material culture is, however, an entirely different matter, and if we assume a substantial post-Roman continuity of native populations (as most scholars now do), then the Russian case may offer an intriguing parallel. While there are sound economic reasons for buying western goods (they are generally better made, often cheaper, and available), psychological factors (probably a loss of cultural self-confidence after the collapse of old structures and certainties) appear to have played an important role in the westernization of Russian material culture.

But whatever the similarities or differences, the Soviet Union is the most accessible case of Empire collapse for archaeologists to test their approaches to, and interpretations of, past cases. If this potential is to be realized, ethnoarchaeological study and documentation of the recent changes in eastern Europe and central Asia need to be taken up soon.

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<sup>1</sup> In the second half of the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s, Germany accepted more than two million immigrants of ethnic German stock from eastern Europe, the majority of them coming from the Soviet Union, and later from Russia (figure supplied by the Statistisches Bundesamt, Wiesbaden, Germany). Israel has accepted some 650,000 immigrants from the former Soviet Union (*Daily Telegraph*, 10 May 1999).

<sup>2</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 15 May 1997, quoting from the new report of President Yeltsin's Commission on Women, the Family and Demography.