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ACCORDING TO THE FASHION

Elite Cultural Tensions and the Eighteenth-Century Russian Lubok

by Emma George

Abstract

While much scholarship has investigated the ways in which the eighteenth-century Russian state displayed its power to its subjects, popular prints remain a little-explored source base through which to understand the popularization of the state's Enlightenment-era cultural reforms. *Lubki* (singular *lubok*)—cheap popular prints produced via engraving—combined elements of Western European prints with romanticized, "uniquely Russian" visual and textual characteristics, and functioned to communicate ideas of imperial power to a broad audience. A primarily visual medium able to effectively reach a population whose level of literacy was limited, the *lubok* combined illustrations with brief prose or verse captions. *Lubki* could depict narratives, news events, or even political satires. Although they were produced in state-licensed factories and targeted an elite and emerging middle-class urban audience from the mid-18th century onwards, much scholarship from the nineteenth century to the present day has consistently and incorrectly identified *lubki* as reflective of a unified, agrarian Russian folk culture. This paper seeks to reinterpret *lubki* as a medium through which conceptions of Russian identity with their origins in the state's Enlightenment-era cultural reforms were communicated to an elite and middling audience.

Before the *lubok* (plural *lubki*) became a topic of historical scholarship in the early nineteenth century, it went by a variety of names. Defined as cheap popular prints produced via woodcut or copperplate engravings, eighteenth-century *lubki* were manufactured in cities, and most notably in Moscow. They featured illustrations accompanied by captions, verses, or songs, and encompassed a wide range of subject matter, from traditional folktales to (factual and invented) news reports, satires on social life, and religious images.¹ Disseminated to a wide audience primarily composed of elites and merchants in metropolitan areas, they were often seen as distinctly Russian, albeit “low,” art in the eighteenth century, sometimes used for the decoration of houses or collected as cultural heritage artifacts.² Referred to by different names (varying by region, era, and class), the prints that nineteenth-century, Soviet, and contemporary scholars designate *lubki* could be called *poteshnye listy* (“funny sheets”), *panki* (“little panels”), *Moskovskie kartiny* (“Moscow pictures”), or *satiry* (satires) in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.³ The ethnographer Ivan Snegirov (1793–1868)—also associated with nineteenth-century antiquarian collecting, research on “folk” rituals and proverbs, the censorship of literature under Nicholas I, and the tenets of “Official Nationality”—is commonly considered the first scholar to examine the *lubok* as an artifact of cultural history. Scholars’ long-standing use of the term can be traced to Snegirov’s work, although he acknowledged the ambiguity of the term’s origins. Subsequent work has questioned its applicability to all popular prints in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Russia. Did *lubok* originate from *lub*, the type of tree bark from which the folk artists supposedly produced these pictures? From Lubianka Street in Moscow, where some *lubok* printers operated presses and sold their wares? Or simply from *lubok*’s association with things disposable, cheap, crude, and poorly made? Though the term’s origins are ambiguous, it became the catch-all name with which to refer to eighteenth and nineteenth-century popular prints by the publication of Snegirov’s *On the Lubok Pictures of Russians* (1844). Additionally, it came to denote the *lubok*’s associations with the idea of a romanticized Russian agrarian “folk” culture developed throughout the nineteenth century.⁴

From the era of Karamzin’s first official histories of Russia, scholarship on the *lubok* associated it with an idea of a unified Russian “folk” or *narod*. Though *lubok* collectors like imperial official Adam Olsufyev and historian Mikhail Pogodin established this link as early as the late eighteenth century, Dmitry Rovinsky definitively linked the form to the agrarian masses in his 1881 collection *Russian Folk Pictures (Russkie narodnye kartinki)*.⁵ While popular prints did reach the peasantry by the later nineteenth century, more recent scholars note that eighteenth-century *lubki* were not only principally metropolitan in origin (despite their conscious use of “folk art” conventions), but also primarily produced by and targeted

towards the elite and merchant classes within urban society.⁶ Twentieth-century Soviet scholarship continued to comment on the *lubok* as a window into the psyche of a unified Russian folk. As late as 1984, Alla Sytova’s introduction to *The Lubok*—a compilation of *lubki* chiefly taken from Rovinsky’s collection—described it as “profoundly” and “essentially” defined by “the spirit of the people” and of “the common man.”⁷

More recent authors have acknowledged the limitations of associating the *lubok* with a unified Russian folk culture. However, little contemporary work has attempted to tackle the topic, with some of the most recent scholarship being Stephen M. Norris’s work on the *lubok* as an instrument of enforcing perceptions of a unified national culture after the social destabilization of the Napoleonic wars.⁸ With respect to the eighteenth-century *lubok*, Dianne Ecklund Farrell’s scholarship is the most notable example, highlighting the Moscow factories where popular prints were produced and providing insight into their content, development, and increasing popularity over the course of the eighteenth century.⁹ It seems useful, therefore, to re-examine the eighteenth-century *lubok*—its particular use of both “Western” and “Russian” sources and artistic and literary elements, its relationship to the state and to censorship, its particular employment of satire, and its treatment of the *narod*. Rather than representing a manifestation of “folk” spirit, *lubki* were concerned with elite cultural tensions about identity, and with mediating between the “Western” and the “Russian” in politically significant ways. Though the necessary scale of such a re-evaluation is beyond the scope of this overview, I will attempt to outline ways in which to re-interpret the *lubok* of the eighteenth century as an object consciously created by and for urban elites and merchants that expressed their particular cultural tensions. In the eighteenth-century *lubok*, artistic and literary motifs perceived as uniquely Russian were blended with Western European conventions; satire was light enough to evoke notions of an “enlightened” sphere of public discourse without posing a political threat; the state influenced popular print through both direct legislation and cultural reforms; and elements that evoked an agrarian *narod* were chiefly valued for their appeal to the urban consumer.

Eighteenth-century Russian *lubki* combined both “Russian” vernacular elements and Western European elite ones in order to appeal primarily to their elite and merchant-class urban consumers. The prints most often cited to connect the *lubok* with a unified “folk”—those concerned with folk tales, motifs, and legends—recalled Russian folktales (like that of Baba Yaga), but also medieval Western European legends (like that of Melusina the Fish). Such *lubki* displayed legendary tales of figures like Alexander the Great, fairytales of all kinds, historical epics with both Western and Russian subjects, and older Western European tales taken from chivalric

- 1 Dianne Ecklund Farrell, “Popular Prints in the Cultural History of Eighteenth-Century Russia,” (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1984), 65.
- 2 Gary Marker, *Publishing, Printing, and the Origins of Intellectual Life in Russia, 1700–1800* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 120.
- 3 Jose Alaniz, *Komiks: Comic Art in Russia* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 18.
- 4 Alaniz, *Komiks*, 18.
- 5 Farrell, “Popular Prints,” 4.

- 6 Elise Kimerling Wirtschafter, “The groups between: *raznochintsy*, intelligentsia, professionals,” in *The Cambridge History of Russia: Volume 2, Imperial Russia, 1689–1917*, ed. Dominic Lieven, Maureen Perrie, and Ronald Grigor Suny (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 253.
- 7 Alla Sytova, *The Lubok: Russian Folk Pictures, 17th to 19th Century* (Leningrad: Aurora Art Publishers, 1984), 6.
- 8 Stephen M. Norris, “Images of 1812: Ivan Terebenev and the Russian Wartime *Lubok*,” *National Identities* Vol. 7, No. 1 (2005), 10.
- 9 Farrell, “Popular Prints,” 42.

Lubki and Cultural Westernization

- 10 Farrell, 5.
- 11 Farrell, 37.
- 12 Dianne Ecklund Farrell, "Medieval Popular Humour in Russian Eighteenth Century Lubki," *Slavic Review*, Vol. 50, No. 3 (1991), 551.
- 13 Farrell, "Popular Prints," 76.

Fig. 1. "Gloriously He Dined and Gaily He Drank." RNK No. 99. Photo courtesy of the New York Public Library Digital Collections.

romances.¹⁰ Rovinsky's writing on the *lubok* devoted particular attention to identifying which popular prints had Western sources and whether they incorporated narratives or topics common in Western European popular prints, or whether a given *lubok* could be traced to a contemporary or historical Western European source.¹¹ Some *lubki* dealt with topics or scenarios representative of what Dianne Ecklund Farrell has called a vernacular culture of "medieval popular humour."¹² Others were directly based on Western European sources which urban printers and consumers would have likely been exposed to. *Lubok* No. 99 in Rovinsky's collection, "Gloriously He Dined and Gaily He Drank" (Figure 1), was copied from a French popular print caricature of Louis XVI and reprinted in Russia multiple times throughout the eighteenth century. Although the target of its satire (a man whose appetite resembles that of "five hefty barge-haulers") was not immediately apparent in Russia, it was speculated in the nineteenth century to perhaps depict Grigory Potemkin (in a later nineteenth-century reprint) or Peter I (in an earlier edition).¹³



Lubki with Western European elements or sources thus appealed to the elite and merchant-class consumer enough for Moscow's state-licensed factories (like that of Ilya Akhmetev, who operated twenty presses in the city) to reprint them multiple times throughout the century.¹⁴ Further Western elements introduced to the eighteenth-century *lubok* are depicted in advertisements (as in No. 277b in the Rovinsky collection, "The Party Smoking Tobacco") for foreign products, which simultaneously designate the object as appealing because it is Western and identify the consumer with both Russian characteristics and Westernized refined taste ("Foreign gentlemen like to use tobacco... therefore they stay healthy"; "tobacco amuses us and heals our eyes").¹⁵

Similarly, state-controlled and licensed eighteenth-century *lubki* self-consciously blended Western and Russian elements in order for their messages to appeal more broadly to the consumer, such as prints produced under Catherine II that ridiculed Old Believers, or the earlier "The Barber Cutting the Beard of an Old Believer." Though previously considered a satire of Petrine policies, this latter example has been recently reinterpreted as a print issued to enforce conformity to state reforms on a popular level.¹⁶ As *lubki* had to adhere to state restrictions on printing, many of those produced during Peter I's reign purposefully combined antiquated "folk" artistic elements and themes with new imperial script and spelling reforms.¹⁷ The character of the eighteenth-century *lubok*, in its visual and textual conventions, was consciously developed according to the cultural demands made by its urban, merchant-class, and elite consumers. The most demanded *lubok* art style was the "Koren" style, developed in the early eighteenth century by the Yaroslavl engraver Vasily Koren who would later work in Moscow. Yaroslavl itself was notable in the early eighteenth century for its "folk" art-style woodcuts, but also for its growing wealth from trade, exposure to Western culture, and dominant well-to-do merchants.¹⁸ This art style—which came to characterize the *lubok* form and remained popular into the early nineteenth century—arose out of a particularly eighteenth-century confluence of "folk" art and Western European artistic conventions, and combined elements of both in a way that appealed to its urban consumers. Western European artistic elements were blended with traditional "Russian" imagery in multiple ways. *Lubki* could depict subjects in Western European eighteenth-century dress but portray them in a woodcut art style reminiscent of older Russian art. They could depict Western folktales or chivalric romances in a "Russian folk" style (or vice versa), or combine Koren-style depictions of Russian characters from vernacular with text taken from various Western sources. One *lubok* portrayed Alexander the Great in the Koren style, and with a distinct resemblance to Peter I. Western and Russian elements were here combined in a way that reflected the tensions expressed by imperial performances of culture throughout the Petrine period and later eighteenth century.¹⁹

- 14 Farrell, 33.
- 15 Farrell, 206.
- 16 Farrell, 205.
- 17 Marker, *Publishing, Printing, and the Origins of Intellectual Life in Russia, 1700-1800*, 21.
- 18 Farrell, "Popular Prints," 253.
- 19 Farrell, "Popular Prints," 229.



Fig. 2. “When I Lived In Kazan.” RNK No. 234. Photo courtesy of the New York Public Library Digital Collections

20 Farrell, 411.
21 Farrell, 81.

Another *lubok* in the Koren style depicts a character who comments on his transition from wearing traditional Russian dress to wearing Western eighteenth-century dress: “When I lived in Kazan, I strolled about in a sarafan...a goat-fur coat. Now I...dress according to the fashion...[and] take walks in elegant gardens” (Figure 2).²⁰ This *lubok*’s combination of vernacular, elite, Russian, and Western visual and textual elements reflects specific eighteenth-century Russian elite cultural tensions, between the necessity of adopting Western fashions in opposition to antiquated customs and the shortcomings of those fashions.²¹

Mimicking eighteenth-century Western prints that satirized popular fashions, the characters in this *lubok* take the era’s trends (and their wigs) to ridiculous new heights. Finally, the text of the eighteenth-century *lubok*

expressed similar tensions, targeted the elite consumer, and blended elite and vernacular elements—texts were often freely taken from both Western and Russian sources, elite authors like Sumarokov contributed verses, and many *lubki* that feature verses of folk songs actually made use of elite poetry composed in a self-consciously “folk” style. This literary characteristic of the *lubok* lasted beyond the eighteenth century—verses by Pushkin, Lermontov, and Nekrasov appeared on *lubki* throughout the nineteenth century.²² The *lubok*’s blend of Russian and Western visual, literary, and thematic elements expressed the cultural tensions that characterized its urban elite, merchant-class, and *raznochintsy* consumers over the course of the eighteenth century.

Lubki and Enlightenment Satire

Cultural tensions were also at work within eighteenth-century *lubki* in their treatment of satire—it is the specific qualities of the “satirical *lubok*” that have been most controversial in scholarship on the topic. From the earliest collectors of *lubki* to the present-day, writing on *lubki* has produced different interpretations of their various “satirical” elements. One of the most famous *lubki*, “The Mice Are Burying the Cat” (Figure 3), has long been held as an Old Believer satire concerned with Peter the Great’s burial. The text of the *lubok*—which identifies its subject as “the Cat of Kazan, the Mind of Astrakhan, the Wisdom of Siberia”—parodies the Russian ruler’s extensive title and imperial holdings, while the mice rejoice that the cat has died, transporting his coffin while his Finnish widow provides beer to the festive funeral’s attendees.²³ Various more recent interpretations, however, have posited that, rather than being satires that specifically target Peter the Great, prints like this simply represent a “culture of medieval popular humor” concerned with animal humour and festive inversion, and do not have political commentary as their central function. While interpretations like these are ostensibly meant to distance modern *lubok* scholarship from its older counterpart, the generalizations they make about an inherently apolitical, unified “culture of medieval popular humour” seem intrinsically tied to nineteenth-century conceptions of the *lubok* as expressive of the spirit of the Russian *narod*.²⁴

Other more recent scholarship has moved in a different direction, rejecting the *lubok*’s identification with an agrarian “folk” vernacular or any democratic realm of “the people” while also re-examining the issue of satire.²⁵ Under such an interpretation, a print like “The Mice Are Burying the Cat” would contain satirical undertones, but ones concealed enough for its creator to explain them away as simply representative of “folk humor.” Additionally, if Old Believer communities did produce such a print—though the creator of “The Mice Are Burying the Cat” has never been distinctly identified—they would have equally been part of an urban marketplace of print where the consumers were primarily elite, mercantile,

22 Farrell, 10.
23 Farrell, 89.
24 Farrell, “Medieval Popular Humour in Russian Eighteenth Century Lubki,” 565.
25 John Etty. “Krokodil’s Format and Visual Language.” In his *Graphic Satire in the Soviet Union*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2019, 39.

court cultural performances, a tension between cultural homogenization and differentiation from Western Europe.²⁹ On the level of the imperial court, cultural performances that expressed this tension were what seemingly gave monarchs the right to rule. It was the combination of the values denoted by Catherine II's embarking on Orthodox pilgrimages and those denoted by her devotion to Western Enlightenment artistic, literary, and philosophical trends that, Richard Wortman argues, legitimized the empress in the eyes of her subjects.³⁰ The eighteenth-century *lubok's* relationship to satire expressed a similar cultural tension. "Enlightenment" discourse at the popular level was dependent upon the free circulation of new ideas in print, but this was not a feasible setting for the *lubok* to operate within eighteenth-century Russia. The *lubok*, therefore, became representative of the same cultural transformation in elite culture with its origins in the court throughout the eighteenth century. Catherine II enforced popular Enlightenment by licensing the production of light "satirical" material that adhered to Western trends, but only within the restrictions of strict autocratic censorship and the increasing limitations on independent publishing by the end of her reign. No true public sphere of popular print existed in which explicit satire was allowed to proliferate in a form like the *lubok*.

Dianne Farrell has described the later eighteenth-century *lubok* under Catherine II as representative of "the new critical attitude of the Enlightenment at a popularized level."³¹ Though such a "popularized" reach did not extend to the peasantry and Farrell's characterization of the *lubok's* transition from a medieval to an Enlightenment attitude is an obviously problematic one, Catherine II did seek to popularize Enlightenment values through cheap print in a variety of ways. Though the production of *lubki* was usually only restricted, rather than orchestrated, by the state, imperial values influenced elite behaviors and ideas of what it meant to be cultured, which in turn influenced the metropolitan producers of *lubki* who catered to such consumers. These consumers also purchased other kinds of popular print products popularized under Catherine, such as cheap periodical literature and satirical journals.³² Thus, while serious political satire would have resulted in the punishment of *lubok* printers, the presence of satire—or the appearance of it—was taken to be an important part of Enlightenment popular culture. Therefore, when prints like "The Mice Burying the Cat" were reissued throughout the eighteenth century, they were attractive products both for their status as cultural heritage objects and for their implications of imperial satire—but only because such satire was light, indirect, and politically non-threatening.

Deprived of identifying details and politically threatening elements, eighteenth-century "satirical" *lubki* also often took the form of "social" satires ridiculing fashions and social mores, such as "When I Lived in Kazan" and No. 85 in the Rovinsky collection, "A Register of Ribbon

29 Richard Wortman, *Scenarios of Power: Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy, Vol. 1: From Peter the Great to the Death of Nicholas I* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 67.
 30 Wortman, *Scenarios of Power*, 58.
 31 Farrell, "Popular Prints," 317.
 32 Elise Kimerling Wirtschafter, "The groups between: *raznochintsy*, intelligentsia, professionals," 254.



Fig. 3. "The Mice Are Burying The Cat," RNK No. 166. Photo courtesy of the New York Public Library Digital Collections.

and later in the eighteenth century, middle-class consumers. Upwards of 20,000 Old Believers lived in communities in Moscow by 1800, and often sold religious art.²⁶ State control of printing prohibited the *lubok* from expressing targeted or explicit satire. As demonstrated by prints like "Gloriously He Dined and Gaily He Drank" or "The Mice Are Burying the Cat," satires were, in Farrell's words, "neither bold nor subtle" in order to evade imperial censorship.²⁷

The state closely watched the urban marketplace of popular print, concluding in an 1825 statute which declared that all popular prints had to be "moral" or "harmless," not insult the government, particular persons or groups, and provide only positive portrayals of the imperial family. Yet paradoxically, it was state-led cultural reform efforts that made satirical *lubki* desirable in the eighteenth century among elite, mercantile, and middle-class consumers.²⁸ Efforts at effecting "Westernization" and "Enlightenment" throughout the eighteenth century expressed, in

26 Farrell, "Popular Prints," 53.
 27 Farrell, 107.
 28 Farrell, 44.

Colors and Beauty Spots,” which describes the exact meanings of various fashion choices.³³ However, *lubki* like this critique excesses of Western fashion for their lack of adherence to true taste, rather than critiquing the nature of Western fashions themselves. Finally, when individuals or groups were directly satirized, they were never those linked to the state. Instead, such *lubki* intended to use satire to justify imperial reforms to a wide audience of consumers—Catherine II sponsored the production of *lubki* that mocked monastic abuses in order to justify state reforms of the monasteries.³⁴ Satirical *lubki* of the eighteenth century did not, as some scholars previously argued, represent the responses of a vernacular “folk” to the imperial reforms they criticized. Instead, they represented the dissemination of imperial notions of Russian culture through the ranks of the elite, merchant, and eventually, middle classes, and expressed tensions that characterized their elite consumers’ conceptions of such a culture’s definition by both its uniquely Russian and fashionably Western European aspects.

Conclusion

Rather than expressing any kind of agrarian “folk” spirit, as earlier scholars claimed, the eighteenth-century *lubok* was a product defined by urban and elite production and consumption. It served a didactic function in terms of its cultural position, able to reflect the kind of culture deemed fashionable and politically necessary at court—both united with the tastes of Enlightenment-era Western Europe and differentiated from it by aspects that conveyed notions of distinct, essentially Russian character. Even *lubki* with satirical elements had a particular role to play, expressing the innate “Russianness” of the *lubok* that attracted the consumer while also appearing to emulate the Enlightenment satires deemed fashionable during Catherine II’s reign. The *lubok*’s power as a cultural form was established by the late eighteenth century, and as the years progressed, its reach extended further down the social hierarchy. Rather than coming to represent the spirit of the “folk,” however, it retained its urban and elite origin even as it began to reach the peasantry. In the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars, artists would turn to the *lubok* as an art form that would allow them to “redefine Russianness” in the wake of events that had destabilized it.³⁵ It was the *lubok*’s use of “popular” elements that made it an effective medium to popularize conceptions of a Russian culture whose origins lay in the state.

33 Farrell, “Popular Prints,” 408.

34 Farrell, 210.

35 Stephen M. Norris. “Petersburg Patriotism in 1812: Lubok Artists and Russian National Identity,” Miami University (Symposium: “Imagining St. Petersburg”), 2003.

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