

GETTING ACQUAINTED WITH SMYSHLIAEV AND OTHER LOCAL HEROES FROM PERM

by **Julia Mannherz**

One of the many joys of doing historical research is that one encounters at times a person of the past whose life enables the researcher to get a profound sense of a bygone period. Sometimes, such an historical acquaintance even allows the historian to propose a new understanding of the society in which this person lived, and this is – of course – what the historian’s craft is all about. At times, the new acquaintance is such a charming person that getting to know him or her almost feels like making a new friend. Dmitrii Dmitrievich Smyshliaev (1828–1893) is a man who ticks all those boxes. His life reveals a great deal about nineteenth-century Russia, and I really wish that a time machine existed that would enable me to spend an evening by the fireside with him.

I first “met” Dmitrii Dmitrievich when I began researching Russian nineteenth-century provincial culture. Like a number of other historians, I believe that life in the provinces has a lot to teach us: not only is it more representative of contemporaries’ experience, as many more people lived outside of St. Petersburg and Moscow than in those two cities; but the history of the provinces also tells us about important aspects of nineteenth-century life which we are unlikely to see if we keep concentrating on the capitals.¹

Smyshliaev lived most of his life in the city of Perm, located in the Ural mountains, about 1,400 km east of Moscow and roughly 1,900 km from St. Petersburg. Like a number of other provincial inhabitants, he became over the course of his life what Russians call a *kraeved*: a person who is knowledgeable about his hometown and region. We would call him a local historian and ethnographer, but Dmitrii Dmitrievich’s

love for his birthplace was not purely academic: he was also a local politician, a journalist and a cultural figure. His life and his writing reveal profound affection for his hometown, and he manages to endear the city of Perm to his readers. This is quite an achievement, given that Perm was much harder to sell than most other Russian towns: in the nineteenth century, Perm was still a young and rough place, characterized by heavy industry and life in barracks. Only a distant decision, taken in St. Petersburg as part of Catherine the Great’s administrative reforms in 1780, had turned the village-sized factory settlement of Perm into a provincial center. By 1804, the town had no more than 4,000 inhabitants. Some ninety years later, however, this figure had risen to 45,000, and by 1913 the population of Perm counted about 75,000.² This is a massive increase: within a century, Perm was transformed from a small factory village with a largely male population to an important provincial city, replete with parks, sidewalks, gas lanterns, schools, libraries, a local museum and a theater. Some differences to traditional Russian cities, however, remained. One of them was that Perm had very few noble inhabitants. Those who owned factories and land in the Urals continued to live in the more refined Western parts of the empire. In the absence of Russia’s traditional cultural elite, bureaucrats, merchants, and other members of non-noble estates took on the role of Perm’s cultural leaders.

RAPID URBANIZATION and the rise of the bourgeoisie are developments typical of nineteenth-century European history. Most historians, however, have argued that the tsarist Empire differed from Western and Central Europe in that there was no Russian bourgeoisie, and that middling estates played largely insig-

Out of the shadows appear long bygone role models for a new Russian bourgeoisie.



nificant roles in the country's history.³ Perm may be a slightly unusual example if compared to other towns in European Russia, but I think that rather than being the exception that proves the rule, Smyshliaev's world and the vital role of ordinary local inhabitants in it is not unusual for the period. The contribution of merchants, traders, artisans, and low-ranking bureaucrats to local culture is merely more visible in a context where the nobility is not in the spotlight.⁴ What we see in Perm, then, is the existence of an active Russian middle class that drove local policy and sociability: staffing local administrative bodies; funding local schools, hospitals, and libraries; driving cultural life; and running the local economy.⁵ I'm following Jürgen Kocka's definition of middle class here, according to which that group is too diverse to be defined in strict Marxist terms that rely upon economic means of existence and production. Instead, members of the middle class were united by shared perceptions and values, such as a common sense of distance from both the nobility and the people, and a culture of achievement, education, and self-reliance, often combined with a secularized worldview.⁶

Smyshliaev, who wrote essays on local history and numerous sketches about influential inhabitants of Perm, describes these middling people. His heroes are – like the middle class in Kocka's definition – of various backgrounds: the daughter of a local bureaucrat, a state peasant who became an economist, a serf turned archaeologist, another peasant who became a painter. Smyshliaev also wrote about his father, a local merchant. Unlike other provincial historians then, Smyshliaev did not focus on the lives of those Permians who eventually achieved renown far away. Instead, he was interested in those who did not become household names in Russia's national history, but whose activities changed life in the Urals. Consequently, he published short biographies of all mayors of the city, wrote loving portraits of all secondary-school teachers, and published a list of men and women (!) who ran publishing houses in the city.⁷ He reserved a special place, however, for Permians who became – like Smyshliaev himself – local intellectuals.

One of Smyshliaev's heroes was Aleksandr Nikiforovich Zyrianov, born in 1830 as a state serf in the district of Shadrinsk. Although Zyrianov only went to school for a few months, he was eager to learn and became a scribe for the local administration at the age of 16. He collected folklore, took part in archaeological digs at Iron Age burial mounds, and recorded meteorological data; but his real intellectual passion was the academic study of the artisanal economy which provided the livelihood of most of his ordinary contemporaries. Zyrianov published extensively in local and imperial journals on Perm folklore and small-scale economics. In addition, he taught at the school of his village Ivanishchevskoe, where he also established a library containing

8,000 volumes. Although Zyrianov was encouraged to engage in regional administration, he remained in his local district, where he died in 1884.⁸

Another of Smyshliaev's heroes, who also had to overcome social obstacles in her pursuit of learning, was the writer Ekaterina Aleksandrovna Slovtsova (1838–1866). The daughter of a local official had to endure hostility from Permians who regarded an extensive education as undesirable in a young woman. Socialites

avoided her during parties, and numerous inhabitants made fun of the ink stains on her hands, or rumored that she wore blue stockings and engaged in orgies with unworthy men.⁹ Slovtsova, however, spent her nights reading extensively, and studied for a while at the university of Kazan where she impressed her teachers. When she returned to the Urals, she corresponded with leading intellectuals of the day such as the Slavophile Ivan Aksakov and the journalist Mikhail Katkov. She also lectured on the social standing of women, supported the founding of a Sunday

school for girls, and published fiction under the pen name Kamskaia.¹⁰ Slovtsova-Kamskaia died of consumption at the age of 28, and was celebrated by the St. Petersburg newspaper *Golos* as a martyr who had risked her health for women's learning.¹¹

SMYSHLIAEV'S OWN PATH to learning was not as arduous as that of Zyrianov or Slovtsova. He was the son of a highly educated merchant, Dmitrii Emel'ianovich. Alongside his trade, the elder Smyshliaev had an interest in geology – a very apt pursuit in Russia's foremost mining region – and a large collection of minerals. Dmitrii Emel'ianovich was also a bibliophile: he had acquired a fine library and possessed rare manuscripts. He was engaged in local politics and even served for a while as Perm's mayor. Throughout Russia, wealthy merchants often took on this role – not always entirely voluntarily, as it was time-consuming and costly.¹² We don't know whether the elder Smyshliaev regarded this office as a burden, but his political interests and liberal leanings are underlined by a friendship he struck with the disgraced statesman and reformer Mikhail Speranskii when the latter was exiled to Perm in 1812.¹³ Dmitrii Emel'ianovich was no revolutionary, though. He was, like most of his contemporaries and the overwhelming majority of Russia's merchants, a deeply religious man, who donated the money needed to convert the wooden structure of Perm's All Saints' Church into a sturdier stone building. Nonetheless, Dmitrii Emel'ianovich's intellectual interests and political liberalism contradict the dominant view held by many historians that Russia's merchantry rejected rational learning and was politically conservative.¹⁴

Smyshliaev the younger thus grew up in a family in which learning was valued and commitment to the local community was a lived reality.¹⁵ Dmitrii Dmitrievich continued this family

“IN THE ABSENCE OF RUSSIA'S TRADITIONAL CULTURAL ELITE, BUREAUCRATS, MERCHANTS, AND OTHER MEMBERS OF NON-NOBLE ESTATES TOOK ON THE ROLE OF PERM'S CULTURAL FIGURES.”

tradition with a breathtaking number of public-spirited activities: In the winter of 1859–1860 he organized musical and literary soirées together with the local gymnasium teacher N. A. Firsov, the proceeds of which they donated to fund a girls' gymnasium and girls' Sunday schools.¹⁶ In the same year he teamed up with another high school teacher, a local official, and a ship owner to found a local library.¹⁷ The years that followed saw Dmitrii Dmitrievich at his busiest, and this is no coincidence: this was the period of Russia's so-called Great Reforms, during which Alexander II's liberal policies changed Russian institutions profoundly and encouraged local grass-roots activities.¹⁸ As part of these reforms, the *zemstva* (singular: *zemstvo*) were founded, bodies of local self-administration, and it is in this context that Smyshliaev found his calling. As a *zemstvo* activist and one-time head of his local *zemstvo* branch, Smyshliaev managed to see to the establishment of a maternity ward in the *zemstvo* hospital. His initiative was also vital for the founding of a smallpox ward within the city hospital, an outpatient veterinary center, a *zemstvo* veterinary school, a local statistical bureau, a local educational board, a *zemstvo* publishing house, and local magistrates' courts. He furthermore oversaw road improvements and the beginnings of a *zemstvo*-run insurance system. In his capacity as a private citizen he managed to open a Perm branch of the Free Economic Society, Russia's oldest learned society and a prominent institution that was independent of the state.

All of these activities were accompanied by prolific publishing. Smyshliaev wrote numerous articles on the history and economy of the city of Perm and its region in the local newspaper *Permskie gubernskie vedomosti*. He also edited the *Sbornik Permskogo Zemstva* (Digest of the Perm *zemstvo*), and published an account of his journey to Jerusalem in 1865, a voyage he undertook after the death of his wife. Between 1885 and 1889 Smyshliaev returned to Palestine where he organized support for Russian pilgrims in the Holy Land.

SMYSHLIAEV'S WRITINGS about the history of Perm and its inhabitants are a labor of love. In them, he celebrates the achievements of peasants and of women who obtained learning, gained success and recognition against the odds, and applied their abilities in the service of others. Smyshliaev's sincere interest in and empathy for others make me wish I could interview him about his life in a nineteenth-century provincial Russian city. Yet even without that possibility, his tremendous energy and ceaseless efforts reveal much about his times and the society he found himself in. Smyshliaev's activities illustrate how local inhabitants engaged with municipal affairs, and what a significant difference they could make in provincial life. We see that those who were engaged in local affairs in Perm came from various backgrounds and pursued different professions. Their lives show that private



initiative and serving as a representative of the state by assuming official roles could at times coincide in one person. This is an important point, since historians have usually described Russian history as being defined by the antagonism between state and society. And indeed, this adversarial relationship did exist. Yet it is important to note that too clear an opposition between those two entities obscures more than it explains. Cooperation between the state and its people existed not only in the activities

of individuals, but also institutionally, as Smyshliaev's *zemstvo* activities and his father's mayoral stint illustrate. Smyshliaev's activities furthermore underline how important regional identity was in driving local activism. This regional sense of belonging is another important point for Russian studies, as commentators have usually stressed the importance of the center. The activities of the Smyshliaevs suggest moreover that both the personal identification with a provincial region and public-spirited activities have a much longer history, predating the mid-century Great Reforms. Dmitrii Emel'ianovich Smyshliaev the elder already lived both these realities, which his son continued.

THE RUSSIAN nineteenth-century bourgeoisie, then, does not look so different from its Western counterpart. Even though we cannot grasp the Russian middle class in legal terms, since the Smyshliaevs would have been registered as merchants, Slovtsova-Kamskaia most likely as a *raznochinka*, and Zyrianov as a peasant, their daily schedules – reading, lecturing, publishing, engaging in local affairs, socializing with like-minded contemporaries – would have been similar. Through these activities and their self-description as Permians, they developed a shared identity.

One difference, however, remains. According to Kocka, the Western European bourgeoisie was often secular. This is obviously not the case with these Permians: the Smyshliaevs, like most of Russia's merchants, were deeply religious. Likewise, Slovtsova-Kamskaia's positive literary characters are naturally Orthodox believers. Yet this religious faith did not prevent the Smyshliaevs or Slovtsova-Kamskaia from espousing liberal political views: working towards women's emancipation, establishing schools and hospitals, and shaping local politics.

I have only known Dmitrii Dmitrievich for a relatively short time, and there is much more I hope to learn about him and his contemporaries. As this research project about local sociability proceeds, I expect that he can teach me more about everyday life in a provincial town, about the interaction of men and women from various backgrounds, and the way they shaped their lives. ✕

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Local heroes working for local achievements. We like to revive them, don't we?