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Édition électronique

URL : <https://journals.openedition.org/monderusse/8626>

DOI : 10.4000/monderusse.8626

ISSN : 1777-5388

Éditeur

Éditions de l'EHESS

Édition imprimée

Date de publication : 1 octobre 2003

Pagination : 629-656

ISBN : 2-7132-1833-0

ISSN : 1252-6576

Référence électronique

Andrew JENKS, « Palekh and the forging of a Russian nation in the Brezhnev Era », *Cahiers du monde russe* [En ligne], 44/4 | 2003, mis en ligne le 01 janvier 2007, consulté le 03 septembre 2022. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/monderusse/8626> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/monderusse.8626>

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| Editions de l'EHESS | *Cahiers du monde russe*

2003/4 - Vol 44

ISSN 1252-6576 | ISBN 2713218330 | pages 629 à 656

Pour citer cet article :

—JENKSA., Palekh and the forging of a Russian nation in the Brezhnev Era, *Cahiers du monde russe* 2003/ 4, Vol 44, p. 629-656.

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ANDREW JENKS

PALEKH AND THE FORGING OF A RUSSIAN NATION IN THE BREZHNEV ERA

One of the more interesting paradoxes about post-Soviet Russia is the continuous maintenance of Lenin's embalmed body for viewing on Red Square. Literally and metaphorically, Russians have not buried Lenin. His statue continues to dominate the town square of many Russian cities and villages. His name remains attached to countless street signs, institutes, stadiums, and factories. The example of Lenin points to the challenge of drawing neat and tidy dividing lines around key historical events. Political systems collapse, yet many aspects of those systems survive, creating a symbolic and cultural landscape that endures well into the "new" era. To be sure, no one would argue that the Bolshevik seizure of power in 1917 or the overthrow of that power in 1991 were not momentous events which radically transformed social, political, and especially economic structures. But what didn't change? What remained constant across these revolutionary divides? How were aspects of the culture and society from the previous period integrated into the culture and society of the following era? What, in other words, were the limits of change and revolution?

This article addresses these questions through the village of Palekh, located approximately 300 kilometers northeast of Moscow. Palekh is a famous community of Russian artists. The artists of Palekh were noted for their production of supposedly "traditional" Russian art in the late imperial and Soviet periods. Like Soviet Russia itself, Soviet Palekh was not a *tabula rasa*, an entirely new kind of community forged in the blast furnace of class warfare and Marxist ideology.¹ The reasons for this were numerous. Foreign and domestic consumers were avid consumers of Palekh's imagery, which was based, by and large, on romantic visions of Russian folk culture from the late imperial period. These consumers provided the regime with precious foreign currency. The regime's willingness to bolster Soviet

1. On the Soviet Union as a unique civilization see Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic mountain: Stalinism as a civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

legitimacy by co-opting Russian national symbols further enhanced Palekh's position as an official center of supposedly "traditional" Russian culture. The village's imagery created a symbolic safe haven from impersonal monumental art and the features most often identified with Soviet modernization: urban blight and the glorification of the factory milieu. Finally, the artists of Palekh deftly exploited a nostalgic turn in Soviet culture of the 1960s. The revolution's destruction of cultural values, compounded by the Nazi destruction of ancient Russian monuments, triggered an intense feeling of cultural loss. As part of this nostalgic turn, many Soviet Russians looked beyond the 1917 revolutionary divide for cultural roots and identity. Palekh provided an outlet for satisfying these nostalgic yearnings. In the process, it supplied Soviet Russians with a distinctive sense of national identity within the larger context of the multinational Soviet culture.

By the end of the Brezhnev era, a supposedly primordial Russianness, rather than class affiliation or international solidarity, constituted the state's main building block for Soviet Russian identity. In light of the Soviet Union's unexpected collapse, which was accompanied by the complete disintegration of its elaborate infrastructure of cultural patronage, this development was highly ironic. The seeming triumph of Russian cultural nationalism came at precisely the moment when the nation's key patron, the Soviet state, was on the verge of collapse. Exploring the conjunction of factors behind the Brezhnev-era revival of pre-Revolutionary Russian culture, this essay concludes by examining the dilemmas posed by the Russian Federation's "orphaning" of Russian national identity.

Any visitor to Russia encounters Palekh's art — either in Russia's many museums or from aggressive hawkers of Russian exotica. The "classic" Palekh lacquer boxes of the Soviet era featured Russian folk motifs, fairytales, troikas, and firebirds — all done in the various styles of Russian Orthodox religious icons. While this art form was a product of the 1920s, few are aware that Palekh was a celebrated center of Russian national culture before the Bolshevik Revolution. The peasant masters of Palekh had been painting icons continuously since at least the sixteenth century. With the rediscovery of Russian national traditions in the nineteenth century, the peasants of Palekh acquired fame in conservative intelligentsia circles as living relics of an ancient and sacred national tradition. In the reign of Nicholas II, they were patronized by Tsarist bureaucrats, who attempted to control and direct their art for purposes of creating a distinct sense of Russian national identity which was grounded in rural religious traditions and opposed to secular Western culture.

Despite its association with the official ideology of the Romanovs, Palekh's art not only survived the Revolution, albeit in a new medium and with new subject matter, but it also thrived. Beginning in 1923, the Palekh masters gained a new life as producers of Soviet folk art. Facing opponents who declared their art counter-revolutionary, they "Sovietized" themselves by filling the old forms of Russian Orthodox icon painting with various folk themes, most of which they borrowed from the market for Russian exotica that had emerged in the last half of the nineteenth century. With its pantheon of Russian folktales and peasant motifs, Palekh rejected

a virulently technocratic, anti-peasant system of values — even during the first five-year plan, when industrialization and the modernization of the countryside were rallying calls for Soviet commissars. As one Palekh artist put it in 1932, he was determined to show a Russia that must never “live in...gigantic stone boxes,...sleep in...identical holes, dress in...identical gray clothing, eat bread with corn and corn kasha (*kukuruznaia kasha*) and...turn everything with living spirit (*vse odushevlennoe*) into a geometrical standard.”² In a word, this producer of official iconography, a religious icon painter turned Soviet propagandist, propagated a vision of Russia that was anything but proletarian, technocratic, or industrial.

Surprisingly, the Palekh masters found a receptive audience for such a vision, including important high-level officials, who frequently intervened to save the village from its foes during the first five-year plan, and foreign consumers, who provided valuable foreign currency with which to buy tractors and machine tools. Palekh thus became a celebrated enclave of rural craftsmanship by the mid-1930s, thanks to the entrepreneurial skills of the masters, high-level patronage (including Maksim Gor’kii and Nikolai Bukharin) and foreign buyers (among them André Malraux and Romain Rolland).

At the same time, Palekh continued to incite political controversy. A chaotic and improvised affair, the formation of Soviet Russian culture and identity in the Stalin years was marked by constant debates about the relationship of the pre-Revolutionary legacy to the new society. Each of Palekh’s triumphs was tainted by the village’s association with supposedly reactionary and counter-revolutionary traditions. Especially troubling was the proper relationship of the supposedly benighted and ignorant Russian *muzhik* (formerly the subject of romantic idealization among Russian populists) to the new darling of the intelligentsia, the proletariat. In a climate of heightened debate about the contours of the new society, national and populist conceptions of community frequently clashed with class-based notions of a new proletarian culture and society, which vilified the *muzhik* as the embodiment of everything Russia must overcome.³ Late-imperial visions of Russian culture and society constantly surfaced in articles, literature, and visual imagery of the 1920s and 1930s, much to the chagrin of militant Bolsheviks.

Unwittingly, Soviet nationalities policies in the 1920s also encouraged the emergence of identities with an explicitly national rather than class-based orientation. In line with the policy of “indigenization,” officials attempted to construct Soviet communities that would be national in form but socialist in content. They believed that socialist and proletarian content would ultimately prevail over national form — and eventually create its own forms.⁴ Yet from the start, party leaders disagreed on the precise nature of this synthesis — or even if

2. Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv literatury i iskusstva (RGALI), f. 94, d. 50, l. 9.

3. On tensions between Marxism and nationalism see Roman Szporluk, *Communism and nationalism: Karl Marx versus Friedrich List* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

4. Yuri Slezkine, “The USSR as a communal apartment, or How a Socialist state promoted ethnic particularism,” *Slavic Review*, 53 (Summer 1994): 414–452.

such a synthesis was possible. What distinguished socialist content from national form? What were the telltale signs of a genuinely socialist culture? As Martin Malia has argued, the Soviets knew socialist culture was not capitalist, but they were less sure about what it would actually be, since no one had ever created one before.⁵

The absence of a clear party line created an undefined space in Soviet culture, a kind of cultural vacuum into which an astonishing array of forms and ideas presented themselves for party inspection. Palekh's art grew up in the vacuum of Soviet cultural policy. Within this vacuum, many forces outside of party control began to exert a decisive influence on Soviet Russian identity, including markets, consumer tastes, and especially the legacy of late imperial Russian culture and its canon of romantic Russianness. The lack of ideological clarity on the problem of socialist identity thus nurtured a surprisingly diverse and retrospective culture — notwithstanding the regime's obsession with ideological purity and with escaping the constraints of the historical past. Equally important, the lack of ideological clarity in cultural matters allowed for a surprising level of participation and engagement in the interpretation of Soviet Russian culture. Rather than implementing commands from the center, culture producers very often had to determine their own themes and approach, since commands from the center were either vague or nonexistent. Rather than resisting the system and its dictates, they became participants in the project of cultural construction — and their own identity was increasingly tied to the honors and accolades offered to them by the regime.

This chaotic process of cultural formation, and the doubts it constantly raised about the revolutionary nature of the new culture, certainly troubled many Soviet ideologists. Driven by a fear of counter-revolutionary backsliding, cultural officials from the 1920s to the mid-1950s debated the supposedly counter-revolutionary nature of Palekh's art. This was true even in the late 1930s and through the post-war Stalin years, when Russian national culture was supposedly privileged over all others. Officials were especially outraged by the use of standard forms and clichés from Russian religious icon painting and the repetition of folk motifs inspired by the elite infatuation with Russian folk culture in the late imperial era. Typical of attacks on Palekh was the following review of Palekh art from late 1931. The reviewer complained that, “not one serious effort has been made to transfer the craftsmen to producing items where one might sense the presence of Soviet themes.” It sarcastically noted in Palekh the predominance,

of the same old [images of] quaint little churches, dashing troikas, maidens by the water well, and so forth. [It is] as if there were no Revolution, as if everyday life was unchanged, as if there was no such thing as socialist construction. Everywhere the same worn out motifs, covered with the dust and mould of the world of Nicholas I (*Nikolaevshchina*): barons, Mothers of God, serf labor.⁶

5. Martin Malia, *The Soviet tragedy: A history of socialism in Russia, 1917-1991* (New York: Free Press, 1994).

6. *Ekspozitsiia khudozhestvennykh izdelii i kovrov* (August-September 1931): 5.

The masters were urged instead to follow the mainstream style of urban socialist realist art — or else face potentially dire consequences. The point was reinforced in 1938 by the arrest and execution of one of Palekh's most prominent artistic leaders — and after the war by a renewed crackdown on “traditional” Palekh lacquers and on religious believers among the artists.

Nonetheless, advocates of a more traditional art in Palekh survived these attacks, due to high-level patronage and to the proven marketability of Palekh lacquers in the West, for which the Soviet regime received precious foreign currency. A standoff emerged, pitting advocates of tradition (mostly older artists trained in the Tsarist era) against self-styled revolutionaries (mostly younger artists trained in the Soviet era). After the war, a new generation of Palekh artists, many of them trained in more mainstream socialist realist art in the 1930s, enthusiastically joined campaigns within the Soviet art bureaucracy to purge Palekh of its supposedly reactionary elements. These individuals believed that the artists must decisively complete their transformation from “god-daubers,” a pejorative term for peasant icon painters first used by Tsarist elites, and into cultured Soviet artists. In the late 1930s, and again after the war, they waged a constant battle in the Palekh art cooperative against the “old-timers,” the *stariki* who had been trained in the Tsarist era. Their rallying call was the eradication of the old forms and themes and the creation of a new repertoire of socialist realist topics, including the representation of Soviet leaders, factories, and urban culture.

The most vocal revolutionary artists were the front-line servicemen, or *frontoviki*, who vigorously advanced their views on the proper style and content of Palekh art — mirroring a broader phenomenon of the bold and confident war returnee in Soviet politics and society.⁷ In 1947 and 1948, inspired by the *Zhdanovshchina*, Palekh's returnees from the front launched the new wave of Palekh art, motivated by what they believed to be a new party line in the center, to wit, a “move away from archaic elements and a striving for a more truthful representation of reality.”⁸ One *frontovik* said his “generation was raised in the spirit of patriotism, of loyalty to the ideas of Lenin and Stalin. We genuinely believed in the bright future. We tried to express our sentiments in our works on the contemporary theme.”⁹ The Palekh newspaper in May 1949 trumpeted the work of the “artists-*frontoviki*” as proof of a genuine re-forging of Palekh humanity in the post-war period: realistic portraits of Stalin, partisans of the Great Patriotic War, a tribute to labor in the USSR as “a matter of honor, glory, and heroism,” and a depiction of labor in the mines.¹⁰

7. Vitalii Kotov, “Vzgliad skvoz' gody,” *Prizyv* (3 April 1998): 3; V. Kotov, “Zashchita diplomnykh rabot vypusknikami khudozh. uchilishcha,” *Tribuna Palekha* (8 July 1954): 2.

8. Partiinnyi arkhiv Ivanovskoi oblasti (PAIO), f. 2487, d. 9, l. 16.

9. K. Bokarev, “Vremia vse rasstavit na svoi mesta, no lushche, esli my sdeluem eto sami,” *Prizyv* (12 May 1999): 3.

10. “Novye raboty khudozhnikov-frontovikov,” *Tribuna Palekha* (13 May 1949): 2.

Back in Moscow, the vice-director of the Tret'iakov condemned an excessive focus on historical themes and an idealized representation of pre-Revolutionary "leaders and Tsars." At a 1947 conference on Russian folk art, he said historical themes had to engage the revolutionary traditions and not turn into "a flight from contemporary themes."¹¹ He urged the Palekh artists to remember that many of their images, made for export, "were a prisoner to the petty-bourgeois ideals...in the Western European and American artistic industry. At first glance, such themes appear perfectly harmless but in the end turn out to be not at all harmless. We are quite familiar with many things in which a tremendous ideological emptiness hides behind external brilliance." Such works, he suggested, also fall into the hands of Soviet consumers, corrupting domestic tastes and influencing other Soviet folk artists, who looked to Palekh for direction.¹² One artist in the audience asked the vice director "how to combine the wonderful traditions, which have developed over the centuries, with contemporary content. Just a year and a half or even two years ago our art critics protested against filling these...traditions with any other kind of content...How does one explain this?" The vice director responded vaguely. "The combination of creative traditions in such a way as to preserve them and yet to create items that are genuinely modern in spirit and theme is the path of greatest resistance."¹³

One of the most important *frontoviki* was G. M. Mel'nikov, who finished the Palekh art school during the terror. When he returned to Palekh after the war, he said he wanted to overcome the central "error" in Palekh's art from the 1920s and 1930s — the inability to distinguish the old from the new.

It often happens that artists, drawing an image of a peasant from the old village and the image of a collective farmer of the new village, interpret them identically, simply adding a few incidental details, with which they want to distinguish the new from the old, thinking that this alone would add something new.¹⁴

Palekh artists, in his view, must depict the new Soviet men and women "so that they reveal the new era." The first years of the Khrushchev regime provided additional inspiration to many of the self-styled revolutionaries of Palekh; they interpreted Khrushchev's attempt to rejuvenate and de-Stalinize Soviet society as a return to the genuine roots of international socialism. On lacquer boxes they painted realistic images of foreign communist leaders and political activists such as Mao Tse Tung and Paul Robeson — representations that many of the older artists condemned as a betrayal of authentic Russian folk art and traditions.

Another *frontovik*, A. Borunov, tackled the topic of "the Slacker (*brakodel*)" in late 1953. The conflict in Borunov's lacquer echoed the battle of generations in the artistic collective. Borunov's slacker was an older tractor driver who carelessly

11. RGALI, f. 2322, op. 1, d. 110, l. 13-14.

12. *Ibid.*, l. 16-18, 22.

13. *Ibid.*, l. 25; Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (GARF), A-396, op. 1, d. 325, l. 5-8, 149-52, 160-63, 222, 244-46.

14. G. I. Gorbunov, ed., *Palekh* (Ivanovo, 1954): 88-89.

allowed his plow to run too shallow. Vigilant young collective farmers members, like the *frontoviki* in relation to their elders in Palekh, noticed the mistake, which they immediately corrected. Borunov, wrote one reviewer, was said to be “the first among the creative artists of the collective to depict the conflict typical of life in the kolkhoz, and he thus revealed the great possibilities inherent in the medium of the miniature.” Few of the older masters, however, were impressed with the “Slacker” — or with the numerous creative works of his cohort, including “The New Agricultural Tax,” “A Happy Childhood,” “Brotherly Aid to China,” “The Obligations are Over-fulfilled,” and “The Youthful Brigade.”¹⁵

Only by the late 1950s did the tone of debates take a decisive turn against the self-styled revolutionaries from the front. In 1958, the older leaders of the Palekh production studio noticed a definite upgrading of Russian cultural affairs in Moscow, which they shrewdly saw as a turning point for a more “traditional” stylistic and thematic approach. The Central Committee had formed a “Russian bureau” to promote Russian national culture. A new Union of Writers of the RSFSR, a counterweight to its all-union complement, followed shortly thereafter, as did a new Union of Artists of the RSFSR, in which dozens of Palekh masters became charter members.¹⁶ As if to sanction Palekh’s pre-Revolutionary accomplishments, the Palekhians in 1959 were called upon to restore their greatest political triumph of the late imperial era: the elaborate murals of the Kremlin Palace of Facets, which their forefathers had painted for the 1883 coronation of Alexander III.¹⁷ Palekh artists, especially those working in a more traditional manner, received greater pay, more exhibit opportunities, and opportunities to travel abroad for exhibits.¹⁸

Among other things, the rising status of the more traditional Palekh art was linked to the Soviet Union’s increasing contacts with the West, which provided the regime with both foreign currency and, equally important, a sanction for the art itself. Patronage of the folk arts gave the regime a sense of distinctiveness and cultural superiority.¹⁹ Soviet authorities viewed Palekh’s art as a supposedly ancient art form that had been destroyed by the impersonal and mechanical forces of a soulless

15. V. Dudorov, “Tvorcheskie uspekhi khudozhnikov,” *Tribuna Palekha* (7 November 1953): 2.

16. V. Kotov, “Est’ li budushchee u sela-akademii?” *Prizyv* (5 January 1995): 2; K. Aimermakher, “Partiinoe upravlenie kul’turoi i formy ee samoorganizatsii (1953-1964/67),” in K. Aimermakher, ed., *Ideologicheskie komissii TsK KPSS 1958-1964. Dokumenty* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 1998): 7, 12.

17. V. Mazurin, “Nuzhen li nimb Iude?” *Prizyv* (15 April 1997): 3.

18. Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Ivanovskoi oblasti (GAIO), f. 2977, op. 3, d. 76, l. 28; d. 90, l. 16. On the upgrading of folk arts and craftsmanship in Soviet cultural policies in the last half of the 1950s see: L. M. Popova, T. M. Razina, “Khudozhestvennye promysly 1950-kh godov,” in N. V. Cherkasova, ed., *Narodnye khudozhestvennye promysly RSFSR. Istoriia i sovremennost’*. *Sbornik nauchnykh trudov* (Moscow, 1991): 117.

19. In the late 1950s and early 1960s Western art, literature and film increasingly began to penetrate the Soviet Union, prompting much hand wringing and concern among party ideologists. On the Central Committee’s obsession in the late 1950s and early 1960s with trying to reassert control over the cultural sphere see the collection of documents *Ideologicheskie komissii TsK KPSS 1958-1964. Dokumenty*, op. cit.

capitalist order. The enthusiastic reception of Palekh's art in the West only seemed to confirm this view. As evidence of the increasing importance of "traditional" arts and practices in Soviet self-perception, the Soviets arranged 10 international exhibits of arts and crafts in 1957, 13 in 1958, 23 in 1959, and 25 in 1961.²⁰ In 1957 Palekhians exhibited in Afghanistan, Poland, Syria, Vienna, and elsewhere.²¹ A Soviet cultural official at an exhibit of Soviet crafts in New York in 1959 admitted that while Soviet Union had some ground to make up in the industrial sphere, it would never relinquish its lead "in spiritual life." Another cultural official said:

Many foreign visitors of Soviet exhibits are surprised by the variety of manual labor in the art industries together with a highly developed industrial technology. The workers at our exhibits convincingly explain that in the art industries all the decorative works are the result of the creative labor of thousands of talented masters, whose hand gives these works that spiritual profundity, warmth, and unique enchantment that the most perfect machine production can never achieve.²²

Domestic tastes similarly aligned with foreign demand for Russian exotica, providing a popular basis for the regime's now emphatic embrace of Palekh's art.²³ The viewer comment books in the State Museum of Palekh art reveal an overwhelming sense of pride and identification with the distinctly Russian traditions of the Palekh lacquer — its evocation of religious icon-painting traditions, the folk themes and bright colors, the reference to idyllic rural landscapes.²⁴ Through the 1950s and especially the 1960s, a broad cross section of visitors — from junior-high students and cosmonauts to powerful cultural officials in Moscow and army generals — demanded that these traditions be preserved and propagated. They were inspired by the Nazi destruction of Russian national monuments, which energized a nascent movement to preserve traditional Russian culture and enhanced a profound sense of cultural loss first piqued by the revolution itself. If some Palekhians had lingering doubts about the center's appreciation of Palekh's traditions, an announcement from the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Republic in the spring of 1959 clarified matters: it would be working with the Palekh branch of the Union of Artists to hold a two-day seminar in Moscow on

20. Palekh in 1960 was exhibited, among other places, in Baghdad, Beijing, Bucharest, Budapest, Leipzig, Oslo, Vienna, Afghanistan, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Italy, Poland, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, and Yugoslavia. In 1963 Palekh produced lacquer boxes for 63 international exhibits, including Afghanistan, Australia, Austria, Burma, Canada, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Mali, Pakistan, Poland, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, and Yugoslavia. GAIO, f. 2977, op. 3, d. 74, l. 1; op. 4, d. 17, l. 72.

21. PAIO, f. 676, d. 346, l. 105.

22. *Nauchno-issledovatel'skii institut khudozhestvennoi promyshlennosti. Sbornik trudov*, 3 (Moscow: Legkaia industriia, 1966): 6-7, 9; V. Kotov, "Est' li budushchee u sela-akademii?" *Prizyv* (27 December 1994): 2.

23. GAIO, f. 2977, op. 3, d. 76, l. 95; d. 93, l. 9-13.

24. These books, which cover most of the postwar years, are contained in the library of the State Museum of Palekh Art.

"The Artistry of the Palekh Miniature and the Artistic Traditions of Ancient Russian Painting [the Soviet euphemism for Russian religious icon painting]." The emphasis of this seminar was not the modernization of Palekh, as in earlier decades, but the preservation of its traditions and supposedly "ancient" roots.²⁵

Meanwhile, Palekh's lacquer business continued to grow, bolstering new cultural policies with economic clout.²⁶ In 1960, retail outlets in Moscow and Leningrad signed contracts for the delivery of 745,000 rubles worth of boxes and exports of 300,000 rubles. Much of that went to special foreign currency shops for the growing legions of foreign tourists. Palekh miniatures were also available in retail outlets for Soviet consumers.²⁷ In accordance with the increasingly stable Palekh canon, these items, which were now officially called "souvenirs," depicted Pushkin fairytales, rural idyll, Russian knights errant, troikas, Russian peasant dancers, and so forth. Explicitly socialist and proletarian themes were conspicuously absent.²⁸ Though it is impossible to say what motivated Russian consumers to buy these souvenirs, they probably shared the sentiments of one group of Soviet college students from Ivanovo in 1961. Visiting the State Museum of Palekh Art, they said they saw in Palekh "the embodiment of the Russian people, its thoughts, feelings, and desires. [The art of Palekh] was born long ago, but just as long ago was born the optimistic and bright art form about which we are so proud, for only the Russian people could create such a thing."²⁹ The market, and the economic benefits it provided to both the regime and the artists, thus continually drove the aesthetic choices made by the Palekh art collective, not to mention cultural policies in the center.

Reflecting the decisive embrace of Palekh and its style, the Central Committee in June 1961 reviewed an ambitious plan to expand Palekh's art in Soviet society. The plan included a host of construction projects in the village itself, including new housing for artists, a new restaurant, art school building, library building, bathhouse, museum building, paved sidewalks, and much more. This outpouring of state largesse was designed "to further develop Palekh art and raise its role in the education of the toiling masses, and also with consideration of Palekh's inclusion in the list of sites for visitation by foreign tourists."³⁰ At the same time, the State Museum of Palekh Art made tours of the central cathedral in Palekh, and the icons and religious murals that it contained, a centerpiece of the Palekh tour.³¹

25. GAIO, f. 2977, op. 3, d. 98, l. 22.

26. GARF, f. A-10004, op. 1, d. 3, l. 2; d. 7, l. 8-9, 11; d. 10, l. 1; d. 11, l. 33, 35, 60, 200, 202, 225; d. 21, l. 48, 50; interview with Aleksei Gennad'evich Smirnov, 14 July 2001, Palekh.

27. GAIO, f. 2977, op. 3, d. 99, l. 15.

28. *Ibid.*, l. 83-84.

29. Gosudarstvennyi muzei Palekhskogo iskusstva (GMPI), kn. ot., 1960-1962, l. 43.

30. Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv noveishei istorii (RGANI), f. 5, op. 37, d. 98, l. 52-62.

31. GAIO, f. 372, op. 1, d. 11, l. 1.

Palekh's secure position reflected fundamental changes in attitudes toward aspects of Russian culture — both in the population at large and in the highest echelons of power. Dominated by ethnic Great Russians, the party began to forge an open alliance with conservative Russian nationalists. Building on the earlier war-time revival of patriotic Russian culture, the Soviet state supported and co-opted the forces of conservative Russian nationalism, whose “central features,” noted Andrei Amalrik, “are an interest in Russianness, a belief in the messianic role of Russia and an extreme scorn and hostility toward everything non-Russian.”³² Tellingly, the native Palekhian Pavel Korin, an openly devout Orthodox Christian, received in 1958 the highest title for a Soviet artist: a People's Artist of the USSR. The KGB finally closed their long investigation of Korin in January 1961. After four decades of constant surveillance, the secret police concluded that Korin, like Palekh itself, no longer presented a danger to the Soviet state.³³ In December 1962 the artist Il'ia Glazunov told a sympathetic ideological commission of the Central Committee about the shameful neglect of Russian national traditions, especially Russian Orthodox churches and icons. “How will we develop patriotic pride, what will we love,” he lamented, if the regime allowed priceless treasures of church architecture and art to perish. “A genuine artist-creator should believe in the life-creating forces of his native country, he should search for creative inspiration in the bright wellsprings of national creativity.”³⁴ The title of one laudatory article devoted to Palekh in January 1964 embodied the more emphatic embrace of Russian national symbols in the last decades of Soviet power: “It has the Russian soul, it smells of Rus’.”³⁵ The appearance of such a headline in a newspaper of the late Stalin era, or even in the mid-1950s, would have been framed in ironic quotes. Almost certainly, it would have signaled an attack on Palekh's lack of Soviet spirit.

Perhaps less surprising than the party's alliance with Great Russian nationalism was that this alliance took so long to come about — especially given the surge of Russian patriotic sentiment and Russian Orthodox belief in World War II. Marxist ideology, which disdained rural traditions and privileged class over nation, was a major reason. Seen through the prism of Palekh, Leninist ideology and its disdain for Russian muzhik culture had a surprisingly enduring impact. Since 1917, the Palekhians faced wave after wave of hostile campaigns from Moscow, which were directed against the supposedly “archaic” and reactionary traditions of the Russian peasantry and countryside. Equally important, the Soviets confronted the challenge of ruling a multi-ethnic empire, which meant imposing limits on Great Russian

32. Andrei Amalrik, *Will the Soviet Union survive until 1984?* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970): 39. On the alliance between intelligentsia nationalists and party elites see also Yitzhak M. Brudny, *Reinventing Russia: Russian nationalism and the Soviet state, 1953-1991* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998).

33. V. I. Tereshkina, “‘...Eto ne ukhodiashchaia Rus,’ a Rus’ sushchestvuiushchaia ... unichtozhit’ ee nel’zia,” (P. D. Korin v doneseniakh upravlinii NKVD-NKGB SSSR. 1941-1945 gg.),” *Otechestvennye arkhivy*, n° 2 (2000): 75.

34. K. Aimermakher, ed., *Ideologicheskie komissii TsK KPSS 1958-1964*, op. cit.: 326, 328.

35. “V nikh russkii dukh, v nikh Rus’iu pakhnnet,” *Rabochii krai* (28 January 1964): 4.

nationalist sentiments to maintain manageable relations between Russians and non-Russians.

Yet the symbols and traditions of Great Russian national culture continued to attract support, especially compared with the increasingly cliché-ridden and formalistic rituals of Soviet culture in the Brezhnev era — or the perceived decadence of modern Western art.³⁶ Khrushchev's infamous attacks on abstract, foreign, and modernist art in December 1962 at the Manezh exhibit illustrated high-level attitudes that directly benefited the Palekh masters. After the outburst, the Central Committee Secretary L. F. Ilyichev told a gathering of artists in Moscow that, "the Leninist principles of the Party and folk nature of art are and will continue to be the foundation of our Party's policy in the sphere of the development of socialist culture." Khrushchev, in March 1963, noted that he grew up on Russian folk songs and culture and that every nation should have a culture that is intelligible to its people.³⁷ The hamlet was thus aligned with cultural policies in which the Russian cultural legacy (minus its avant-garde and modernists strains) was increasingly, and uncritically, equated with socialism.³⁸

The neo-traditionalists

A new generation of Palekh artists was empowered by the official turn to Russian folk culture. For the new Palekh masters of the late 1950s and 1960s, de-Stalinization meant the celebration of ancient Russianness — a stark contrast to the *frontoviki* who interpreted de-Stalinization as a return to the revolution's international and cosmopolitan roots. The neo-traditionalists imagined the late Stalin era and the early Khrushchev years as a dark period in which de-racinated and de-nationalized bureaucrats supposedly tormented supporters of national tradition. Confident of support from Moscow, they took the offensive against the previous generation of artists who had called for the complete restructuring of Palekh's art. Self consciously restoring the traditions that they believed had been threatened by the perceived imposition of "socialist realism" in earlier decades, new traditionalists looked to the Russian icon and Russian folklore as the foundation of their art. "We began to return to the essence of the style," said Aleksei Dmitrievich Kochupalov, who studied to become a master from 1955 to 1961. He and his cohort "began to purge the rubbish from [our art]...the tractors, combines, and factories [which had] nothing to do with Palekh."³⁹

36. Christel Lane, *The rites of rulers: Ritual in industrial society — The Soviet case* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1981): 240-241, 249.

37. Quoted from Priscilla Johnson and Leopold Labedz, eds., *Khrushchev and the arts: The politics of Soviet culture, 1962-1964* (Cambridge, Mass.: The M.I.T. Press, 1965): 106, 174.

38. Priscilla Johnson, "The politics of Soviet culture, 1962-1964," in P. Johnson and L. Labedz, eds., *Khrushchev and the arts, op. cit.*: 32.

39. Interview with Aleksei Dmitrievich Kochupalov, 15 July 2001, Palekh.

Their ally in Moscow was the art critic Mariia Nekrasova, who believed the more realistic Palekh art of the earlier period was “a pedestal for loud and banal compositions.” Resorting to classic Soviet techniques of argumentation, Nekrasova said Palekh images of Soviet construction projects and Stakhanovites, whose position in Palekh’s production she grossly exaggerated, “were polluted with petty-bourgeois tastes” and “crippled the souls of people” who came to view such imagery at museum displays. She condemned attempts to find a new style and thematic content as “pseudo-innovation.” In her view, the earlier Soviet period was the dark age of Palekh art, when “in essence...the language of [this] original art,” like Russia itself, “was destroyed.”⁴⁰

According to one Palekh artist, many artists after the mid-1960s considered themselves part of the neo-populist and “*pochvennik*” sentiments in some educated Russian circles. They read the works of the so-called “village writers,” authors such as Valentin Rasputin, Vasilii Belov, and Viktor Astaf’ev, who celebrated peasant folk culture and lamented the disintegration of Russian village life. Through the 1960s, the thick journal *Molodaia gvardiia*, a bastion of Russian nationalism under high-level party protection, was obligatory reading for the new generation of Palekh masters, who waged a battle within their own collective against the front-line servicemen. In 1966, the Russian nationalist Vladimir Soloukhin published in its pages a piece “which sought to dramatize the neglect of ancient Russian architecture and to cultivate an appreciation of Russian icons.” The journal subsequently published numerous letters inspired by Soloukhin’s lament.⁴¹ As one Palekh artist recalled, “there was created an entire generation of artists” who sang the praises of Russian peasant life and folklore. Anyone who disagreed with their position risked being branded anti-Russian and anti-Soviet.⁴²

The new generation also drew inspiration from a popular movement to preserve monuments of Russian national culture, which gained many adherents among the Russian youth of the 1960s. While restructuring had been the rallying call of cultural practice in the late Stalin era and even much of the 1950s, preservation gradually became the dominant slogan by the 1960s. Preservationists believed, according to one scholar of Russian nationalism, that “preservation equals patriotism; anti-preservation equals national nihilism.” Co-opting popular demands for the preservation of Russian monuments, the regime in 1964 approved creation of the “Homeland” (*Rodina*) club to promote historical preservation. The Palekhian Pavel Korin helped spearhead the effort, which acquired the name All-Russian Society for the Preservation of Historical and Cultural Monuments, established by a decree of

40. M. Nekrasova, “Vtoroe rozhdenie,” *Prizyv* (3 February 1994): 2-3; Viktor Golov, “Palekh: Upadok ili vozrozhdenie?” *Prizyv* (4 July 1995): 2; M. Nekrasova, “Poetika Palekha,” *Sovetskaia kul’tura* (8 December 1964): 3; M. Nekrasova, “Predmet i miniatura,” *Dekorativnoe iskusstvo SSSR*, n° 2 (1959): 17-20.

41. John B. Dunlop, *The faces of contemporary Russian nationalism* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1983): 67-68.

42. Unpublished paper by the Palekhian Valerii Iuskov, 31 May 1997, in the personal archive of Mikhail Larionov.

the Council of Ministers of the RSFSR. The group's first conference was held in June 1966, and the ranks of this voluntary society grew rapidly, numbering seven million members in 1972 and 12 million in 1977, or nearly 10% of the population of the Russian Republic. Among other things, the society published pamphlets and brochures on the importance of preservation, promoted indigenous tourism to Russia's "Golden Ring," and collected materials related to Russian folk culture.⁴³

While Palekh's earlier jubilees tended to emphasize the village's incomplete Sovietization, Palekh's jubilees in 1964/1965 and 1974/1975 were pure celebration. These jubilees were celebrated in accordance with the founding of the Palekh "Artel of Ancient Painting" in December 1924. In 1964, the former Palekhian and People's Artist of the Soviet Union, Pavel Korin, proclaimed that Palekh had a golden touch. While Midas turned everything into gold, everything the Palekhians touched became beautiful.⁴⁴ Scores of artists received honorific titles. Municipal authorities in Moscow named a street after Palekh. Bards of the popular press composed couplets in honor of the hamlet and its art. In the mid-1960s, a group of more than 100 Palekh masters formed an amateur choir called "The Folk Choir of the Town of Palekh." The Soviet record company *Melodiia* issued a collection of their songs. The group performed on union-wide Soviet television, dressed in traditional Russian peasant costume designed by local seamstresses.

When the choir performs the stage disappears. In its place appears a fairytale place... where the central actors are similar to those in fairytales... It seemed as if they had just emerged from 'folk choir' lacquer miniatures, and having sung their song, they then went back from whence they came.⁴⁵

When the local authorities in Palekh decided in 1966 to erect marble plaques in honor of six founders of the 1924 Artel of Ancient Painting (the seventh, Aleksandr Zubkov, was omitted since he was shot as an enemy of the people in 1938), *Pravda* believed the event was worthy of union-wide coverage. It called the founding masters the "'Patriarchs' of Palekh."⁴⁶ By 1974, about 170 masters produced an astounding 22,000 boxes annually — nearly 130 boxes for each master. Each year, an average of 15 new masters graduated from the Gor'kii School of Palekh Art and joined the collective. For their 50th jubilee in 1974 Palekhians requested and received more trips abroad to accompany their exhibits, more funding for separate "cottages" for leading masters, more control over forming their exhibits, and more business in new media. In a sea of collective farm poverty, Palekh was becoming a banner of rural Russian creativity and soul.⁴⁷ A Soviet passenger liner, in honor of

43. J. B. Dunlop, *The faces of contemporary Russian nationalism*, op. cit.: 64-66, 72-75.

44. P. Korin, "Palekhu 40 let," *Dekorativnoe iskusstvo SSSR*, n° 12 (1964): 1.

45. "Ulitsa Palekhskaiia v Moskve," *Prizyv* (16 February 1988): 4; Pavel Solonin, *Zdravstvui, Palekh! Liricheskie etudy o masterakh russkikh lakov iz malen'kogo poselka sredinnoi Rossii* (Iaroslavl': Verkhne-Volzhscoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo, 1974): 157-158.

46. "'Patriarkham' Palekha," *Pravda* (21 February 1966): 6.

47. Nikolai Rodichev, "Gnezdo zhar-ptitsy," *Sovetskaia kul'tura* (19 November 1974): 5.

Palekh's 50th jubilee in late 1974, was named after Palekh; in a cruel irony, it sank in 1992. The Palekhians, in fact, were so confident of their status in socialist society that they referred to Palekh art as simply: "Palekh realism."⁴⁸

For Palekh, the Brezhnev period of "stagnation," as Gorbachev later put it, was thus a truly golden era.⁴⁹ Continuity with the past, rather than a radical break, became a central theme of cultural construction. "Palekh," noted one journalist, "became for all of us one of the symbols of Russian culture, of its national traditions, of the depths of its historical roots."⁵⁰ The central journal on Soviet cultural affairs seconded the thought, noting that the story of Palekh "is about families who not only have not lost their connection with the past, but who also, as it were, gained strength with the passing of generations."⁵¹ The popular journal *Ogonek* in 1974 summed up Palekh's secure status in the heartland of Soviet Russian culture. Noting the masters' many triumphs, the journal remarked, "it is hard to believe that not so long ago [Palekh] had many influential enemies."⁵²

Sheer fatigue also took a toll on Palekh's home-grown restructurers. The sources of the late 1950s and early 1960s suggest a longing for stability and consensus, which was reflected in a new reluctance in Palekh to air differences in public forums — and in the broader culture by a growing weariness with ceaseless ideological campaigns and mobilizations.⁵³ True, some artists in the Brezhnev period continued to paint boxes on more modern themes and in a non-traditional style (especially of cosmonauts), but in very limited numbers and with limited economic success. Even *frontoviki* turned more and more to fairytale themes and the traditional style. With advancing age and a seeming consensus in the center, they gained a new appreciation of their own roots. The emergence of a new consensus about Palekh's traditions thus signaled that the cultural transformation in the Russian heartland was an accomplished fact. Palekh had entered the phase that Brezhnev called "developed socialism" and Gorbachev later dubbed "stagnation." The Soviet Russian synthesis was nearly complete — although what made it Soviet was far from clear.

48. Nikolai Zinov'ev used the term "Palekh realism" in a special issue of the Ivanovo oblast' newspaper devoted entirely to Palekh: *Rabochii krai* (13 December 1974): 2.

49. Glowing press coverage marked Palekh's golden age. See, for example, Iu. Rudnitskaia, review of Aleksandr Navozov, *Palekhscoe chudo. Rasskazy o khudozhnikakh* (Iaroslavl': Verkhne-Volzhskoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo, 1970), in *Don*, n° 2 (1972): 185, 187; or another review of the same book by G. Sukharev, "Oдно iz chudes...", *Volga*, n° 7 (1971): 172.

50. "Problemy sovremennogo Palekha: kruglyi stol," *Dekorativnoe iskusstvo SSSR*, n° 12 (1974): 10.

51. Nikolai Radichev, "Gnezdo zhar-ptitsy," *Sovetskaia kul'tura* (19 November 1974): 5.

52. Iurii Melent'ev, "Bylinnost' i ogon' sovremennosti," *Ogonek*, n° 50 (1974): 8.

53. GAIО, f. 2977, op. 2, d. 38, l. 29; f. 2976, op. 2, d. 20, l. 3-6; GMPI, f. Sobolevskii, unpublished autobiography of A. V. Kovalev, l. 241.

The nostalgic turn in Brezhnevite culture

As Palekh's status as a crown jewel of Soviet Russian culture solidified in the 1960s, a native Palekh master took on the task of defining the traditions that now seemed to have such a secure future. The individual was Nikolai Mikhailovich Zinov'ev (1888-1979), known in press accounts as "the last of the Mohicans" and "the magician of Diaghilev" (a settlement one and a half kilometers from Palekh, where Zinov'ev lived).⁵⁴ Zinov'ev's personal story illustrates another key factor behind the revival of late imperial culture in the 1960s and 1970s: an increasingly nostalgic turn which prompted many Soviet Russians to look beyond the 1917 revolutionary divide for identity and culture. This nostalgic turn came against the backdrop of an official culture which many Soviets found sterile, uninviting, and "soulless."

Like so many other Palekh masters from the 1920s, Zinov'ev's artistic development began in the 1890s as a painter of religious icons in the private icon studios of Palekh. Inspired by the example of many other Palekhians, especially the "Wanderer" Aleksei Mikhailovich Korin, he abandoned his apprenticeship in the private icon studio system and entered Nicholas II's new icon committee school in 1902, which was created by the Tsar and his conservative advisors to counteract the supposedly corrupting influences of mechanization and Catholic imagery. Like his fellow Palekhian Pavel Korin, Zinov'ev enrolled in the Tsar's new icon school to hone his craft but also to learn the techniques of academic and secular painting. It was thus at the turn of the century that Zinov'ev, with the help of the Tsarist state and conservative Russian nationalist intellectuals, began realizing his dream of becoming a national artist — rooted in a sacred and supposedly "ancient" tradition, yet also conversant with the demands of a more modern and secular art.

To realize his ambition, Zinov'ev traveled to Moscow and St. Petersburg in 1907, supporting himself by working in icon studios. In his spare time he studied secular artists, especially the Russian "neo-realists" Mikhail Nesterov (the teacher of another prominent Palekhian, Pavel Korin) and Viktor Vasnetsov. Like his idols, he attempted to integrate the traditions of Russian religious art and folk culture with a more academic approach, including a job on the eve of World War I to paint an elaborate series of religious murals at the Novyi Afon monastery in the Caucasus.⁵⁵ Zinov'ev's pre-Revolutionary training prepared the young artist surprisingly well for the Soviet period. At the heart of Soviet Palekh's national synthesis, which Zinov'ev more than any other master helped create and sustain from the 1920s to his death in 1979, was the integration of Russian Orthodox aesthetic traditions, the modern technique and ethos of secular art (especially the attribution of authorship lacking in traditional religious icon painting), and Russian folk themes.⁵⁶ Of course,

54. Aleksandr Navozov, *Palehskoe chudo* (Moscow: Sovetskaia Rossiia, 1976): 133. In 1984 his house was converted into a museum.

55. O. Zhurikhina, "Smysl zhizni — tvorchestvo," *Prizyv* (4 May 1988): 2-3; GAIO, f. 372, op. 1, d. 1, l. 1.

56. A. Navozov, "On byl chelovekoliubtsem," *Prizyv* (24 May 1988): 2.

adding new “socialist” content to this art represented a significant departure from the last decades of the Romanovs. Yet even here, the Palekhians drew on much of the emerging canon of folk motifs and ideas from the imperial era, especially the folk images popularized by artists such as Vasnetsov and I. Ia. Bilibin and the popular fairytales of Pushkin. Moreover, the Palekhians themselves were increasingly treated as “folk” artists in the rule of Nicholas II and not simply painters of holy images. Switching in the Soviet era from Christian themes to Russian folk topics was therefore not such a radical or illogical shift for Zinov’ev, who was deeply influenced by Russia’s great nineteenth century artists and their own growing infatuation with Russian folk culture. Like many other Palekhians, his understanding of Soviet Russian culture was thus a product of his own experiences and training from the late imperial era, which he actively propagated to the younger generation.

In the 1940s and 1950s, Zinov’ev launched another career as a journalist, writer, and propagandist of Palekh art. He publicly opposed himself to many of the front-line servicemen who following the war advocated Palekh’s strict adherence to the conventions of Soviet socialist realist art — and he inspired many newer younger masters to defend Palekh’s “ancient traditions.” In all these activities Zinov’ev was inspired by a single mission: to preserve the style of Russian Orthodox icon painting, especially in the face of pressures from his opponents locally and in Moscow who believed that these traditions had no place in Soviet Russian society. As part of that effort, Zinov’ev by the mid-1950s devoted much of his time to bringing his views of the Palekh art and style to the more general reading public — and to the intelligentsia of Moscow and Leningrad. Thus began his odyssey, as he put it in a letter in September 1956, “to sum up my work,” by which he meant publishing his thoughts on Palekh.⁵⁷ The project consisted of a large body of written material composed by Zinov’ev from the early 1950s and until his death in 1979 and contained three elements. The first assembled Zinov’ev’s “conversations” with beginning Palekh art students in manuscript form. Those conversations, which Zinov’ev said in a letter to potential publishers “would be as if I were conducting a conversation on Palekh with the people,” covered everything from the history of Palekh (before and after 1917) to the problem of modernity and innovation in Palekh art.⁵⁸ The second aspect of his ambitious project involved a detailed description of the technique and style of the lacquer miniature and its organic connection with the Russian icon-painting traditions. It was a kind of how-to production book, complete with a dictionary of specialized terms, consciously modeled after the Russian Orthodox *podlinniki* (style manuals) used by Palekh icon painters before 1917. Finally, Zinov’ev recorded memories of both his own life before the Revolution and those of his cohort. The memoirs were a self-conscious effort to correct what he (and many other Palekhians) felt was the widespread misrepresentation of Palekh’s pre-Revolutionary history by outsiders. The People’s Artist and native of Palekh Pavel Korin enthusiastically

57. RGALI, f. 2283, d. 80, l. 5.

58. GAIO, f. 372, op. 2, d. 9, l. 4.

endorsed Zinov'ev's alteration of the conventional history of Soviet Palekh. In an introduction to one of Zinov'ev's books, Korin said Zinov'ev "correctly and convincingly conveyed the spirit and life of the old pre-Revolutionary Palekh," by which Korin meant its positive rather than negative aspects.⁵⁹

Zinov'ev spent years searching for publishers of one proposed work called simply *The art of Palekh*.⁶⁰ With the aid of high-level patrons, including the famous artist Aleksandr Deineka and the art critic Mikhail Sokol'nikov, the book finally went to press in 1968 at the publisher "Khudozhnik RSFSR" — and to Zinov'ev's great delight and vindication its 10,000 copies immediately sold out.⁶¹ A second edition followed in 1974 in 20,000 copies and was also sold out. In the process, Zinov'ev discovered a major ally of pre-Revolutionary art and mythology: the Soviet consumer.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of Zinov'ev's book is its love-hate relationship with the late imperial era that emerges as both the source of all Palekh's problems and the foundation of its cultural renaissance. According to the Soviet convention, culture supposedly declined rapidly and became decadent and depraved following the 1861 emancipation and the rapid development of capitalism. The artistic traditions of Palekh (and elsewhere) thus experienced a "decline" (*upadok*) — a term actually first applied to Palekh by Tsarist elites in the 1880s.⁶²

Zinov'ev was determined to get the story straight. In a letter pitching his manuscript he noted that the first part of the book would describe "the great masters who brought the traditions of ancient-Russian painting up to the October Revolution and thereby laid down the path and created the firm basis for the flowering of new Soviet Palekh art."⁶³ He wanted to focus especially on the life and times of the many talented Palekh masters and icon-studio owners with whom he had associated before 1917, whose portrayal until then, he said bluntly, was "inaccurate."⁶⁴

The published book, like the lectures Zinov'ev had been giving for decades to Palekh art students, remained largely true to his proposal, although he did make compromises. While recounting the supposedly ruthless oppression of masters by the local icon moguls, most of the book's descriptions of pre-Revolutionary Palekh and its masters actually suggested the opposite. The majority of Palekhians, wrote Zinov'ev, were homeowners and had land to farm. Palekh had a vibrant system of trade and "was famous for being an enterprising village," where one could buy all

59. N. M. Zinov'ev, *Iskusstvo Palekha*, 2nd edition (Leningrad: Khudozhnik RSFSR, 1974): 5, 15.

60. GAIO, f. 372, op. 2, d. 9, l. 9-11.

61. *Ibid.*, d. 10, l. 1; d. 13, l. 12. Deineka read and enjoyed Zinov'ev's manuscript.

62. O. S. Popova, "Narodnoe dekorativnoe-prikladnoe iskusstvo," *Sovetskaia etnografiia*, n° 5 (1957): 108; V. Kotov, "Muzei Palekhskogo iskusstva," *Tribuna Palekha* (11 November 1954): 2; V. Kotov, "Oдно iz chudes revoliutsii," *Nauka i religiia*, n° 1 (1961): 26-30; Nik. Kruzhkov, "Paleshane," *Ogonek*, n° 6 (1965): 24; GAIO, f. 2875, op. 3, d. 9, l. 1.

63. GAIO, f. 372, op. 2, d. 9, l. 4.

64. *Ibid.*, l. 9.

sorts of things. Contrary to the notion that the icon craft was being increasingly monopolized by greedy capitalists, Zinov'ev noted that pre-Revolutionary Palekh had a wide range of icon studios and employers. Some, he wrote, "were vicious exploiters and looked upon their business as a source of profit," but others were deeply committed to the art and gave the masters many creative opportunities. "They paid the best of the icon painters well, carefully preserved the ancient traditions, fulfilled orders honestly, and created new types of work." Moreover, masters had the freedom to work in various styles.⁶⁵

Zinov'ev ended his story "About Old Palekh" with a plea to re-evaluate the contributions of the late imperial period to Palekh's art — and to Soviet Russian culture. Listing the names of dozens of "humble laborers" from Palekh in the field of religious icon painting at the turn of the century, he said "thanks to them [...] the art of Soviet Palekh was able to be born." In his lectures to all first-year students in the Gor'kii School of Palekh Art from the 1950s and 1960s he made precisely the same point, recounting the names of nearly 100 masters from the era of "decline" who had contributed to the "Renaissance of Palekh art after 1917."⁶⁶ Rather than calling his fellow pre-Revolutionary Palekhians "god daubers," he treated them as accomplished national artists.

Zinov'ev's effort to retrieve a usable imperial past, however much it contradicted the obligatory Soviet trope of darkness to light, suggested a growing nostalgic turn. True, the Soviets had always allowed part of the "progressive" past to be integrated into the "new" socialist culture. But they drew the line at the last three decades of imperial power, in which the progressive development of capitalism necessarily meant the intense degradation of culture. That line in the late 1960s and 1970s was fading fast, blurred by an increasingly retrospective orientation in Soviet Russian society.

Sensing that his biological clock was running on borrowed time, Zinov'ev continued to expand his project — the fruits of which were actually realized posthumously. His work on *The stylistic traditions of the art of Palekh* was published in 1981.⁶⁷ It provided a detailed analysis, with his own sketches and drawings, of the links between the standard elements of religious Russian icon painting and the Soviet Palekh miniature.⁶⁸ Meanwhile, Zinov'ev continued writing his memoirs until his death in 1979. Some of this work was edited and published in 1987. Adding to the charm of Zinov'ev's work, noted the book's editor, was their conveyance "in a somewhat old-fashioned language," which complemented the increasingly nostalgic and positive treatment of the late imperial period. In his

65. N. M. Zinov'ev, *Iskusstvo Palekha*, op. cit.: 16-17, 27.

66. GAIО, f. 372, op. 1, d. 18, l. 17-18, 19a; d. 29, l. 6.

67. N. M. Zinov'ev, *Stilisticheskie traditsii iskusstva Palekha* (Leningrad: Khudozhnik RSFSR, 1981).

68. Interestingly, though many Palekhians applauded publication of the work, some also were afraid that anyone with some artistic talent might pick up Zinov'ev's "Authentic" and use it as a guide for making their own "imitation" Palekh lacquers. Interview with Anna Aleksandrovna Kotukhina, 5 January 2000, Palekh.

memoirs, Zinov'ev recounted the paths of each of ten "founders of Soviet Palekh art" as a continuous process of acquiring and mastering the traditions. The process, in Zinov'ev's story, began in the last decades of imperial power, which provided the masters with a schooling in icon painting but also instilled a desire to achieve fame in secular national art. Rather than opening new vistas, the October Revolution, like the war before it, appears in Zinov'ev's account much like an obstacle in a fairytale: a challenge to be overcome so that the journey, and the story, can continue. Ever resourceful and determined to finish their transformation into artists and yet preserve the ancient traditions, the masters found a new medium and new business in the 1920s — and through their own efforts, they forged their own rightful place in Soviet Russian society, though one would be hard pressed to find much of anything Soviet in Zinov'ev's tale. In the end, these stories paid tribute to Palekh himself and the talent and ingenuity of the masters.⁶⁹ At the twilight of his life, and of the Soviet Union, the Palekhian Zinov'ev thus wrote a story in which the standard Soviet darkness-to-light story had lost almost all relevance and explanatory power. Far from writing Palekh into the "master narrative" of the October Revolution, he was simply writing his own story — and getting it published. And like the art of Palekh itself, Zinov'ev's rehabilitation of the late imperial era struck a nostalgic chord among Soviet consumers. His nostalgic turn was symptomatic of a fundamental change in Soviet Russian culture in the last two decades of Soviet power — its increasing willingness to embrace more and more of the Russian past as part of the "progressive" national legacy.

The flip side of this wistful vogue was that the "Soviet" half of "Soviet Russian" lost much of its appeal. What did it mean to be Soviet? By the 1960s and 1970s Soviet culture had become increasingly cliché-ridden and ritualistic, remote and formalistic. Even Soviet specialists in the production of Soviet rites and festivals admitted that new Soviet cultural practices were "too uniform, impersonal, overweighted with speeches and lacking in symbolism."⁷⁰ While the cult of Lenin proliferated, so, too, did jokes about communism and Lenin. For many Great Russians, Russian national symbols and traditions, among them the collection and worship of icons, had become far more compelling than those of a more recent Soviet vintage. Perhaps appropriately, this growing level of comfort and identification with pre-Revolutionary Russia coincided with the beginning of the end of the Soviet era in Palekh. Zinov'ev, who had come of age under Tsarist power, missed this dramatic turn of events in 1989 by a mere decade — in what would have been his 101st year. But in more than one way he had already realized his pre-Revolutionary ambitions — thanks to the resources and support of Soviet authorities, who offered him, at the age of 86, the highest of all honors for a Soviet artist, the coveted People's Artist of the Soviet Union.⁷¹

69. M. A. Tikhomirova, *Nikolai Mikhailovich Zinov'ev. Khudozhnik Palekha* (Leningrad: Khudozhnik RSFSR, 1987): 110-146.

70. C. Lane, *The rites of rulers*, *op. cit.*: 240.

71. M. A. Tikhomirova, *Nikolai Mikhailovich Zinov'ev*, *op. cit.*: 108.

A final restructuring: living and dying on the market

Ironically, political and economic collapse came at the moment of seeming Russian national triumph. Thanks in part to state sanction and support, by the mid-1980s the All-Russian Society for the Preservation of Historical and Cultural Monuments had nearly 40 million members. The All-Russian Society for the Preservation of Nature boasted 15 million members. About 50 million Soviets belonged to the Russian Orthodox Church, itself a testimonial to the growing spiritual void in official Soviet life.⁷²

The results of the 1979 census further mobilized support for Russian national symbols. According to trends clearly noted in the census, birth rates among Great Russians were declining while those of non-Russians, especially the Muslim Central Asians, were on the rise. As a percentage of the Soviet Union's overall population, Great Russians were becoming a minority nationality. Threatened by the loss of majority status, many Russians redoubled demands for the support and preservation of distinctly Russian national traditions.⁷³

Not coincidentally, Soviet officials — especially Palekh's key political patron Iurii Serafimovich Melent'ev, a Russian nationalist and minister of culture for the Russian Federation in the late 1970s — continued to pump resources into the village, giving it the required visage of plenty and comfort befitting a Russian rural utopia. First on the agenda was a new production studio, where the master craftsmen would work in an appropriately public and modern facility. At the insistence of Prime Minister Kosygin, work on the new studio began in the 1970s and dragged on through the beginning of the Gorbachev era. An immense structure made from quality Estonian brick, an extreme rarity in the Russian province, the new studio was to be the defining structure of the village. It incorporated a new hotel (to replace the old hotel built in the 1960s), workspaces for the more than 200 masters, a conference center devoted to folk art, and a fitness center.⁷⁴

While the regime built the new studio and transformed the houses of dead Palekh masters into museums, it also commissioned dozens of architectural projects for a grandiose new museum complex. Melent'ev, the nationalist Minister of Culture for the Russian Federation, pushed for a design that clearly evoked Russian national elements. The two-story plan eventually approved (though never built due to the Soviet Union's collapse) incorporated elements from Russian church architecture. The plan envisioned a coat check area capable of holding 500 coats, cafeteria and buffet, 2,000 square meters of exhibit space, lecture and movie hall, a concert hall, a library with 50,000 books, archive, reading hall, and restoration studios. Melent'ev also proposed transforming the Gor'kii School of

72. J. B. Dunlop, *The new Russian nationalism* (New York: Praeger, 1985): 2-3, 10-14.

73. Bohdan Nahaylo and Victor Swoboda, *Soviet disunion: A history of the nationalities problem in the USSR* (New York: The Free Press, 1990): 362-363.

74. Interview with the Palekh master Boris Kukuliev, 30 May 2000, Palekh; Nikolai Rodichev, "Gnezdo zhar-ptitsy," *Sovetskaia kul'tura* (19 November 1974): 5.

Palekh Art into a full-fledged institute (Gor'kii had been a key Palekh patron in the 1930s), complete with a program for studying the history and future application of Palekh' traditions and a "laboratory" for experiments in ancient Russian art.⁷⁵

To accentuate the primordial Russianness of the hamlet, its "fairytaleness," as one journalist put it, the regime in the late Brezhnev era began building a park in Palekh devoted to Russian peasant wooden architecture.⁷⁶ It planned fifteen objects, to be disassembled from around Russia and reassembled on the grounds near the Elijah the Prophet Church — which in the late 1960s was also upgraded from a warehouse to an official monument of Russian national culture. Plans included a 15th century peasant wooden church. In the end, only one of the 15 planned structures, a peasant wooden mill, was installed before the beginning of the collapse of the Soviet Union.⁷⁷

In the meantime, the long-awaited new studio and conference center was nearing completion in the Gorbachev era after more than a decade of continuous construction. It represented the culmination of attempts to transform Palekh into a village academy, which in many respects had begun decades before the revolution. The building was a mammoth brick structure, occupying an entire field above the Elijah the Prophet Church, next to the open-air museum of Russian peasant architecture. Unexpectedly, however, as the heating was turned on for the building in 1989, the village experienced an event that locals immediately dubbed "the schism" (*raskol*), which in turn threatened the legitimacy of Palekh's hard-won synthesis of Russian and Soviet culture. The pretext for the split came in early 1989, when one of the leading artists had accompanied an exhibit of Palekh art to the United States and made a shocking discovery: the sale price of his art, as indicated in an English-language catalogue, was magnitudes greater than his wages. In the spirit of *glasnost'*, he took a copy of the price list of Palekh lacquers for American consumers back to the hamlet, showed it to his colleagues, and began complaining loudly and publicly about the theft of his labor. In the spirit of Brezhnevite stagnation, the Palekh production studios, the one and only artistic business in town, fired him.

Under the banner of *perestroika*, the "*raskol'nik*" therefore started a new organization, which quickly attracted many artists. The upstarts pitched their new organization as the only rightful heir to the "artel" of the founding seven Palekh masters in December 1924, mirroring the broader search in the late 1980s for a "NEP alternative," when socialism supposedly had a human face. "We have thrown off the yoke of the creative dictatorship created by the Generallissimus," they proclaimed. The administrators of Palekh, they declared in the spirit of Soviet anti-bureaucratic campaigns, were part of a "heartless bureaucratic machine," an "administrative command system" incapable of reform.⁷⁸ "Palekh belongs to no

75. V. Kotov, "Est' li budushchee u sela-akademii?" *Prizyv* (5 January 1995): 2.

76. Undated newspaper clip from the early 1970s in the Palekh newspaper *Prizyv*, contained in the library of GMPI.

77. V. Kotov, "Est' li budushchee u sela-akademii?" *Prizyv* (27 December 1994): 2.

78. K. Kochetov, "Vместо или вместе?" *Prizyv* (30 March 1989): 2.

ministries, funds, or art unions! We have had it with bureaucrats. It is time to decide our own fate, the fate of the industry.”⁷⁹

Interestingly, many of the rebels were among the most prominent older party members from the postwar period, including those who had struggled for more modern content and style in Palekh art from the 1930s to the mid-1950s. By contrast, those who stayed behind in the old Soviet collective were many of the masters of the 1960s who had fought for, and won, a decisive return to the “traditional” style of Palekh’s art (which had never really been abandoned). The schism was thus framed in the familiar Palekhian opposition of tradition versus modernity. Neither side, however, claimed to be anti-Soviet — indeed, just the opposite.⁸⁰

Pecuniary motives and the absence of central authority quickly accelerated the process of division, which Soviet authorities had artificially stymied for 70 years.⁸¹ At first, two new organizations competed for the spoils of the Palekh trade, but soon other artists, taking advantage of the new opportunities for small-time private commerce allowed by the economic reforms, formed their own groups.⁸² And everyone seemed to be making money. For the first time since the imperial era, masters were legally free to work for themselves.⁸³ Foreign collectors and traders of lacquers entered directly into negotiations with artists, to whom they promised (and often delivered) princely sums (by Russian standards). The easing of restrictions on travel, and the eagerness of many emigres from the Soviet Union to cash in on new opportunities, created new distribution and sales outlets for artists. The popularity of Gorbachev in Europe and the United States triggered a boom in Russian exotica. Some artists began painting religious icons. Some produced “classic” lacquers of Pushkin fairytales. Some catered to a curious byproduct of *perestroika*, the growth of strong demand for “socialist realist” lacquers as reflections of a dying art form: images of tractors, Lenin, and even the Generalissimus Stalin.

In the meantime, the newly completed studio — the showcase of the new era of communal labor in the Soviet Russian heartland — closed as soon as it was opened. The single cooperative organization to which it belonged no longer existed. Almost immediately, Palekhians began their own process of privatization, securing bricks from the structure for the many fancy new cottages (*kottedzhy*) that began sprouting up around Palekh like mushrooms after the proverbial rain. Like the ruins of Rome in the Dark Ages, the new studio served as building material for the new order. It stands today as a fitting tribute to the Soviet era: a cannibalized skeleton,

79. V. Garov, “Plakha dlia Palekha,” *Trud* (7 October 1989): 2.

80. V. Zotov, “Ne o forme, no o soderzhanii,” *Prizyv* (18 May 1991): 3-4; V. Kotov, “V ego iskusstve est’ dusha,” *Prizyv* (3 December 1991): 1-2; V. Kotov, “Kak zazhech’ putevodnuiu zvezdu,” *Prizyv* (25 November 1989): 2.

81. Evgenii Zhiriakov, “A mozhet byt’, vmeste?” *Prizyv* (21 July 1992): 2.

82. Viktor Golov, “Palekh: Upadok ili vrozozhdenie?” *Prizyv* (4 July 1995): 2.

83. A. Korneva, “V edinstve dukhovnykh i tvorcheskikh tselei,” *Prizyv* (10 November 1994) 2; V. Garov, “Plakha dlia Palekha,” *Trud* (7 October 1989): 2.

covered with graffiti and expletives in grammatically incorrect English. Palekhians call it “the Coliseum.”⁸⁴ On the other side of town, the studio in which the masters had worked since the 1960s — also a large two-story stone structure — is completely abandoned. Its windows are mostly broken and the weeds and garbage grow high around its edges. The material foundations for communism had been decisively and irreversibly abandoned. By 1990, the revolution of October 1917 was overturned — although one would be hard pressed to locate the dramatic events, the storming of so many Bastilles, typically associated with “revolutions.” If there was a Bastille in Palekh, it was the Coliseum, and rather than being stormed it was simply looted before it even opened for business.

Meanwhile, if the boundaries between imperial and Soviet culture became far more porous in the Brezhnev period, the same can be said of the dividing lines between the Soviet and post-Soviet era. Russians continued to mark celebrations of Palekh’s art in Soviet time. The Russian Federation, aided by funds from the philanthropist free marketer George Soros, celebrated Palekh’s 75th anniversary in 1999, an event accompanied by national press coverage and exhibits in Moscow and St. Petersburg. The event took as its beginning point the formation of the Artel of Ancient Painting in 1924 — rather than a time before 1917, when the Palekhians first began painting religious icons.⁸⁵ Similarly, the statue to Lenin, erected in 1956 by a prominent Palekh sculptor, still stands directly across from the Exaltation of the Cross cathedral in Palekh. In the summer of 2001, its future seemed secure, which is in stark contrast to the fate of the statue it replaced on the very same location in February 1917: a bust of the Tsar Liberator Alexander II, which was unceremoniously tossed into the nearby pond. The bust of Lenin was vandalized in November 1991, but almost immediately Palekhians re-painted it and local administrators reminded the hooligans that a native Palekhian, the esteemed Soviet sculptor Nikolai Dydykin, had created it. Also secure is the elaborate monument below the Exaltation of the Cross cathedral to the heroic sacrifice of hundreds of Palekhians killed in the Great Patriotic War. Designed by the same Palekhian who had made the statue to Lenin, it sits atop the former site of the Aleksandr Nevskii chapel.⁸⁶ While that chapel was torn down in the 1930s, the defeat of the Nazis remains an unchallenged achievement of Soviet power. Only the Soviet victory over the Nazis rivals the Soviet Palekh jubilee as a festive occasion in the post-Soviet hamlet.

Attitudes among some artists and art critics have also been very slow to change. With the collapse of the state monopoly over Palekh art in 1989, the old anti-capitalist rhetoric immediately asserted itself — though few stopped to consider that capitalism, even in the Soviet period, had actually underwritten much of the

84. V. Mazurin, “Ne ubit’ by Zhar-ptitsu,” *Prizyv* (3 April 1997): 3.

85. On 21 February 1998 the Soros Fund met in Palekh to discuss its ambitious plans for funding Palekh’s art and cultural institutions. Tape of meeting in Palekh with the Soros Fund, 21 February 1998, from the personal archive of Mikhail Larionov.

86. O. Zhurikhina, “Ivany, ne pomniashchie rodstva,” *Prizyv* (6 November 1991): 2; “Iz istorii,” *Prizyv* (31 July 1993): 3.

village academy and its relatively high standard of living. Viewing the “*raskol*” in late 1989, a journalist remarked that, “the firebird has been plucked and thrown on the frying pan, roasted by the flames of the dispute.” He lamented the dawning of a new age in which the market and its vulgar corrupting tendencies had finally triumphed over the anti-market mission of Russian national culture.⁸⁷

The degree of intelligentsia anger was matched only by its increasing irrelevance — which in fact had been noticeable even in Soviet Palekh, where the hamlet’s production was arguably beholden as much to the market as to the dictates of scholarly or political control. “The collective [in Palekh] has collapsed,” proclaimed one prominent party member and master in 1993, who like many other Palekhians considered himself to be a member of the intelligentsia. “Unhealthy competition has begun. Some say this is all quite natural... Maybe. But that does not mean it will always be this way. Everything, good and bad, will pass. That is life. The present chaos will also pass and a normal life will develop again.” By normal, of course, the author meant a world where state-controlled organizations established monopolies in all spheres of economic and creative life — and where the “desire to own one’s own business” and “make money” had not “destroyed talented artists” and “corrupted the souls of our children.”⁸⁸

Curiously, in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, one hears little in Palekh about the Soviet regime’s destruction of traditional Russian values — a favorite topic among many artists in the 1960s. If anything, quite the opposite is true. The Soviet Union, according to those who look upon the Brezhnev era nostalgically, played the role of preserver and protector of Russia’s national traditions, which allowed Palekh to flourish and occupy its rightful place on center stage in Russian culture. With some justice, the Soviet era has thus been recast in the positive role as a defender of Russian national culture. Russia, in their view, is again under siege — this time from the capitalists within, creating a new division of Russia into various and sundry “appanages” and exposing the nation to foreign domination.⁸⁹

Creative debates also continue, mirroring earlier debates through much of the early Soviet period.⁹⁰ A small group of serious young artists has broken completely with the notion of Palekh as “folk art.” In the mid-1990s, they displayed a new style and content in a series of exhibits called “After the Winter,” by which they meant a rebirth after a prolonged period of stagnation in Palekh art since the early 1960s.⁹¹ Interestingly, they drew inspiration from the past generation of militant Soviet Palekh artists in the 1930s and 1940s who attempted to break away from their teachers and follow the conventions of socialist realist art. “I would like to think a

87. V. Garov, “Plakha dlia Palekha,” *Trud* (7 October 1989): 2.

88. Ol’ga Kondrat’eva, “Spaset li promysel Rossiui?” *Prizyv* (10 September 1992): 2; K. Bokarev, “A chto budet zavtra?” *Prizyv* (1 July 1993): 2.

89. Iurii Melent’ev, “Vernost’ traditsii — fundament edinstva,” *Prizyv* (20 December 1994): 2.

90. Elena Leonova, “Traditsionnyi avangardist Mikhail Larionov,” *Khronometr-Ivanovo* (10 March 1999): 10.

91. V. Kotov, “Novyi stil’ i tvorchestvo,” *Prizyv* (2 February 2001): 4.

bit about what is happening in the country and the world,” noted one of their leaders.⁹² Their ideological platform, like that of their Soviet predecessors, extolled the virtues of, “modernity, a secular nature, individuality, relevance, and a freshness of expressed ideas.”⁹³ Like many of the militant Palekh artists of the 1930s, they frequently mocked variations on the Palekh folklore classics as “plagiarism” (*plagiat*) and believed its propagation is best left to “the Xerox machine or computer. It takes less time.”⁹⁴

Even many of the older generation have quickly adapted — and one gets the impression that the transition post-1991 was actually facilitated rather than hindered by the Soviet legacy.⁹⁵ As in the broader Russian Federation economy, many of today’s New Palekhians were former Komsomol and Party leaders locally. In the late Soviet period, they belonged to the union of artists, displayed their boxes at exhibits, and increasingly traveled abroad, where they made friends and potential business contacts, from which they have benefited in the post-Soviet era. They had close relations with retail and wholesale outlets in Moscow and Leningrad, which also gave rise to the capitalist retail and wholesale trade business of Moscow and St. Petersburg after 1991.

These formerly card-carrying communists have also found a new source of authority and patronage, which itself harkens back to their pre-revolutionary identity. By 2001 they had become regular churchgoers. The head of the Palekh branch of the union of artists from the 1970s and 1980s, Aleksei Kochupalov, has built himself a private chapel, which stands beside his palatial two-story home.⁹⁶ One prominent Soviet-era artist proclaimed that only Palekh had faithfully preserved the traditions of icon painting.⁹⁷ That reputation has helped many of the new “old-timers” — those trained under the Soviets and now growing old in the Putin era — carve out a “new” identity and livelihood for themselves as painters of religious icons.⁹⁸ Meanwhile, Palekh’s two main churches have again become working churches — one in 1989 and the other in 1992 — and Palekh masters proudly display their newest works of religious art in these churches for public admiration and worship. Their Soviet era training as lacquer specialists has thus served them well in the post-Soviet era.

92. See, for example, the press release announcing the “Posle zimy” exhibit of April 1998. Personal archive of Mikhail Larionov.

93. M. Larionov “Snova ‘Posle zimy’,” *Prizyv* (3 December 1997): 3.

94. I. Korshunova, “Posle zimy,” *Chastnik* (29 April 1998): 1.

95. Viktor Golov, “Palekh: Upadok ili vrozozhdenie?” *Prizyv* (4 July 1995): 2.

96. V. Kotov, “Tserkov’ sviatogo proroka Il’i v Palekhe,” *Prizyv* (22 February 1992): 3; Iu. Golikov, “O narodnom,” *Prizyv* (27 February 1996): 2.

97. V. Volotko, “S blagosloveniem Patriarkha,” *Prizyv* (5 December 1995): 2; Iu. Golikov, “O narodnom,” *Prizyv* (27 February 1996): 2; Viktor Golov, “Palekh: Upadok ili vrozozhdenie?” *Prizyv* (4 July 1995): 2; “Muzei, masterskaia, khram...,” *Prizyv* (24 November 1994): 2.

98. Nina Filinkovskaia, “Mastera,” *Prizyv* (22 April 1998): 3.

Confronting the Soviet legacy

Palekh thus presents a picture of the development of Russian national culture in which the hard and fast dividing line of 1917 is put into a more ambiguous light. At the same time, Palekh suggests a far more fluid and dynamic relationship between Soviet power and the production of “official” culture than is often assumed. Relying on market forces and consumer tastes, the Palekh artists carved out for themselves a significant place in Soviet Russian society. The masters of Palekh drew from a legacy of romantic national culture from the imperial period. Rather than images of factory or urban life, they represented romantic visions of the Russian countryside, an ethos of rural craftsmanship, and Russian folk heroes and legends. If the regime had occasionally condemned such tendencies in its first decades, it abandoned all such efforts by the 1960s and officially sanctioned the “traditional” direction in Palekh’s art. From the regime’s perspective, Palekh was too valuable as a source of foreign currency, despite the suspect ideological foundations of its art and its link to foreign, bourgeois consumers. Moreover, when it came to building a sense of loyalty to the Soviet state few other forces on the cultural scene, especially Western popular culture or the avant-garde, seemed to provide a viable alternative.⁹⁹ Palekh’s traditional art seemed to fit the parameters of an “intelligible” art form grounded in the supposed principles of Leninist nationalities policies. A supposedly primordial Russianness, rather than class affiliation or international solidarity, thus became the main building block of identity for the Russian heartland in the late Soviet era.

The regime’s decision to co-opt nostalgic yearnings and Russian national symbols struck a responsive chord in the population. In the post-war era, as the heroic phase of the revolution receded further into the national memory, many Russians increasingly experienced an intense feeling of cultural loss. That feeling was a product of the revolution itself and was accentuated by the destruction of the Nazi invasion.

Not surprisingly, many Russians today look back upon the Brezhnev era as a time when Russian national traditions were nurtured and protected. This feeling stands in stark contrast to the state’s seeming abandonment of the Russian nation after 1991. For many, the communist party, the single largest party in Putin’s Russia, represents the party of the Russian nation. With the collapse of the Soviet state, Russian national culture, in the eyes of many, has been “orphaned” by the state. Far from feeling “liberated,” many Palekh artists find the withering away of the state’s cultural mission intensely disillusioning and disorienting. The expectation of state approval and intervention continues to linger. Even more surprising, despite Palekh’s long-standing dependence on the market, the masters retain a deep suspicion of capitalism, an attitude encouraged by seventy years of

99. Andrei Amalrik, *Will the Soviet Union survive until 1984?*, op. cit.: 39.

intense anti-capitalist propaganda.¹⁰⁰ A key aspect of Russian national identity as it developed in the Soviet period has therefore been severed — its link to the state. And to add insult to injury, Russians must adapt to a world where community and identity are now almost exclusively beholden to the market. Perhaps the Palekh masters, like many Russians, will thrive economically in the new environment of cultural and economic *laissez-faire*, but many will not find that sense of national community that had been the hallmark of the late Soviet era.

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100. V. Kotov, "Tak chto zhe my vytvoriaem?" *Prizyv* (27 June 1992): 2; V. Kotov, "Est' li budushchee u sela-akademii?" *Prizyv* (27 December 1994): 2; V. Kotov, "Mif o sele-akademii," *Prizyv* (9 September 1995): 2; V. Kotov, "Narodnoe li iskusstvo 'Palekh'," *Prizyv* (23 December 1995): 2.