

The Problems of ‘Becoming Soviet’: Former Nobles in Soviet Society, 1917-1941

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Abstract

There has been much new research on the extent to which the identities, beliefs and practises of ordinary citizens changed after 1917, and whether people were 'becoming Soviet'. This emphasis has tended to underplay continuities. This article uses the personal accounts of former nobles to examine levels of change and continuity in their activities and beliefs in the interwar period. There was change; many felt that they had 'become Soviet' because they obtained jobs, survived everyday challenges and endured the regime. Becoming 'workers', however, was not the same as 'becoming Soviet'. Strong continuities in other areas helped nobles to maintain a distinct identity in terms of practises and mentality (if not their material position). Rather than 'becoming Soviet', many former nobles tried to remain themselves. Many were surprisingly successful, suggesting that continuities played a significant role in early Soviet society.

Keywords

Soviet society; former nobility; social conflict; identity

One of the most fruitful areas of recent research into early Soviet history has been examining the issue of ‘becoming Soviet’ – how ordinary citizens reacted and related to the Soviet regime after 1917. Kotkin noted that there were elements of belief and disbelief in all citizens, but it was frequently ‘naked self-interest and omnipresent coercion’ that encouraged people to ‘speak Bolshevik’, and governed their involvement with the regime.¹ Fitzpatrick equated ‘becoming Soviet’ with self-preservation: people learned the new language and practises to survive and progress. They constructed new identities and backgrounds to conform to Soviet ideals and to conceal any unsavoury aspects of their pasts.² Elsewhere, some historians emphasise resistance and dissent³, whilst others argue that many people were willing participants, engaging with the new ideology and actively desiring to refashion their lives and ‘souls’ to become socially valuable citizens.⁴ Valuable use has been made of new materials and approaches to breathe new life into what is essentially a long-running debate.⁵

This article, however, argues that this emphasis on how (and to what extent) identities, beliefs and practises changed after 1917 does not portray the whole picture: most obviously, it ignores continuities. Soviet citizens may have changed many aspects of their lives, but other parts remained unchanged or merely modified.⁶ Of course, continuities could arise from learning to ‘speak Bolshevik’ superficially rather than truly believing, and from creating a new public ‘mask’ as opposed to a wholehearted transformation. They could also be a consequence of failing to adapt, despite attempts to do. Continuities were also part of the nature of the new regime, which increasingly adopted values and ‘norms’ that were heavily influenced by the past.⁷

Nevertheless, an examination of one group on the margins of Soviet society – the former nobility – suggests that continuities ran deeper. Recent work has demonstrated that former nobles, along with other persecuted social groups, remained in the Soviet Union throughout this period, despite frequent arrests and imprisonment.⁸ To survive, all former nobles were forced to

adapt to the workplace, altering certain beliefs and activities. Several noted later that in surviving they had ‘become Soviet’ and some quite clearly did. Antonina Berezhnaia (b. 1910) became an active member of the Communist Party, a ‘shock-worker’, and married a fellow worker. Her life had revolved around economic and social ‘accomplishments’ rather than personal gain; production targets, socially-useful labour and the sense of collectively working towards important goals.⁹ Other accounts, though, are less clear cut. Elena Skriabina (b. 1905) wrote that she and her siblings had become ‘sovietized’ by the mid-1920s. Skriabina called herself a ‘Soviet product’, whilst her mother remained an incarnation of the past, as evidenced by her disapproval of her brother’s new (non-noble) wife.¹⁰ Yet, Skriabina rejected one suitor for being uncouth and eventually married a former tsarist officer. For legality, they married in a registry office, but they confirmed the marriage in church. Kirill Golitsyn (1903-1990) also wrote that his generation was imbued with new Soviet ‘values’ by the mid-1920s. Yet, he lived and socialized with other nobles, and spent much of the decade in prison on account of his past.¹¹

This article uses the accounts of former nobles to examine levels of continuity and change in their activities and beliefs in the interwar period (or, to put it another way, it examines the extent to which they were ‘becoming Soviet’ during this period).¹² Some clearly felt that they were ‘Soviet’ because they obtained jobs, survived everyday challenges and endured the regime, neither actively supporting nor resisting it. Becoming ‘workers’, however, was not the same as ‘becoming Soviet’. Some nobles did not recognize this distinction, whilst others chose to ignore it. The regime expected individuals to refashion all aspects of their lives and mentalities. Consequently, the continuities that persisted in the everyday life of former nobles helped them to maintain a distinct identity in terms of practises and mentality (rather than material position), and at a time when doing so could incur fatal consequences. Personal accounts describe the lives of descendants of many famous noble families – Bobrinskoi, Golitsyns, Sheremetevs, Trubetskoi

and others – as well as numerous lesser nobles. They show that these individuals continued to intermarry and frequently socialized, lived and worked together. Many remained well-educated, participated actively in cultural activities and continued to go to church. None of this was welcomed by the regime as frequent arrests and imprisonments demonstrated.

This argument does not suggest that nobles did not change. In the only work on former nobles, Chuikina argued that they continued to see themselves as ‘nobles’ prior to the Second World War. The persistence of traditional mentalities such as honour, service, duty and politeness helped them ‘endure’ the regime and remain distinct from it. These ‘attributes’ governed how they interacted with the regime.¹³ Her work focused on the labour market – an area of sizeable variety, change, and uncertainty, as she demonstrated. In trying to show how old skills and values fitted into the new world, Chuikina struggled with reconciling a static image of noble values with the fluctuating world of early Soviet Russia. Indeed, Smirnova accused Chuikina of ‘childlike naivety’ in this vision of a social group governed by notions of honour and ‘decency’.¹⁴ Nobles did retain some traditional mentalities, but they also did whatever was needed to survive. They falsified backgrounds, concealed their past and changed their views. This article, therefore, looks at how both elements – change and continuity – influenced former nobles during this period.

Personal accounts are problematic sources in many respects: any evidence that relies on memory involves forgetfulness, suggestibility, hindsight, contradictions, dubious motives and the influence of collective memory.¹⁵ Memoirs are written to justify, apologise, excuse, or promote. They are as frequently read (and analysed) as literature as they are as sources of information.¹⁶ Yet, as recent historians have reasserted, we cannot ignore these personal voices. It is too easy to assume, often without foundation, that somehow memoirists do not mean what they say or that their voice is false and misleading.¹⁷ They are no more misleading than contemporary documents that reflect voices constrained by the fears and concerns of the period. Moreover, subjectivity –

the capacity to think and act based upon a coherent sense of the ‘self’ – forms the value of these accounts.¹⁸ Most former nobles wrote autobiographies rather than memoirs. The former tend to look inward, focusing on the development of the self, whilst the latter concentrate on the public, on prominent events, individuals and actions.¹⁹ There are rarely clear boundaries between the two forms, but a greater focus on the self and how individuals changed over time is vital in answering whether nobles were ‘becoming Soviet’. Autobiographies also conduct a ‘second reading’ of experiences.²⁰ This may lead to some activities being repudiated, but it also permits a broader evaluation of events within the wider context of the period and the authors’ lives.

Personal accounts by émigré nobles focus on ‘invasion’ and defeat, describing intrusions into their private lives, their homes and, ultimately, their country.²¹ Nobles who remained in the Soviet Union, however, emphasise survival, in common with the vast majority of the massive wave of personal accounts that have emerged since *glasnost* in the late 1980s.²² All survivors were denied the opportunity to ‘bear witness’: arrests, disappearances, famine and other horrors became family secrets.²³ Official history promoted achievements, marginalising sacrifices and violence. The emphasis since *glasnost*, therefore, has been to reinstate individual experiences into the history of Russia’s twentieth century. The desire ‘to tell their own story, a story of “I” as part of but also different from “we”’ motivates all memoirists.²⁴ But this desire is particularly strong in Russia, especially for social groups that were completely erased, such as former nobles. They aim to rehabilitate themselves after seventy-four years of Communism so that their experiences are heard alongside those whose achievements were praised at the time. This desire is not always vindictive; indeed, most are more interested in describing their everyday lives than attacking the Soviet regime. In doing so, their accounts complement and extend other sources. They add the ‘private’ to the ‘public’ that has been unearthed by recent archival research, whilst permitting former nobles to discuss what they feel was important. Oral interviews do add private detail, but

their content remains governed by the interviewers' own preoccupations.²⁵ There is much to be learned from assessing how former nobles portrayed and understood their own experiences.

Revolution and Civil War, 1917-1921

The Soviet state that emerged from the October Revolution of 1917 was a self-styled 'proletarian state' founded on the principle of class struggle and the hegemony of the working classes. The Bolsheviks attacked the nobility immediately after seizing power as the obvious example of an obsolete, exploitative and privileged group. On 11 November 1917, the nobility was abolished as a social estate, along with its organizations and its property. Decrees nationalizing land, industry and banks attacked noble landownership and finances. Nobles disappeared into a mass of 'former people' [*byvshie liudi*] – former bureaucrats, landowners, officers, industrialists and 'bourgeois' elements – who were attacked due to their privileged positions under the tsarist regime. Nobles recall frequent seizures of property, evictions and arrests throughout this period.

In 1918, as a 'non-toiling' social group, nobles were amongst those denied the right to vote by the new constitution (a group known as *lishentsy*). In reality there was little worth voting for, but *lishentsy* suffered practical discrimination in everyday life; they were more likely to lose access to employment, housing, education and state aid (rations and medical benefits especially), and were forced to pay higher taxes and rates. They were arrested, imprisoned, exiled and subjected to forced labour. Further amendments to the constitution in 1924 and 1926 explicitly targeted not only those who were currently living from 'hired labour' or 'unearned income', but those who had done prior to the revolution to combat the fact that many former people had since been forced into 'toiling' occupations.²⁶ Nobles only formed a small proportion of *lishentsy*, who in turn were only a minority of the whole population (1-10% at various times).²⁷ *Lishentsy* could

appeal against being disenfranchised and thousands did, with many successes (25-50% of those appealing). Few former nobles appealed, however. Definitions of a kulak or trader were ambiguous and could be challenged; it was much harder to contest adverse social origins.²⁸

Many of these problems were universal; all social groups struggled with housing, food and jobs during this period. But there is no doubt that nobles were more susceptible to arrest and imprisonment, especially as they had an ambiguous relationship to the new state. Many males fought against the Bolsheviks in the White Armies, whilst many others hoped that the regime would collapse sooner rather than later. The accounts reflect these sentiments; the immediate, short-term need to survive was matched with the expectation and hope that the Bolshevik regime would not last. Yet the regime, against all odds, continued to hang on to power and state-led repression further increased from the end of 1918. Increasingly nobles took advantage of the chaos to flee to areas held by the Whites or to escape abroad. These nobles never intended to build a life in Soviet Russia. Irina Elenevskaja (b. 1897) and other members of her family, for example, found jobs and shared a flat in Petrograd. The 'whole purpose' of their existence, though, was to escape to Finland as soon as possible and their life in the city was 'simply a necessary evil.'²⁹ She served on the housing committee, but only to facilitate selling her uncle's furniture for money that could go towards the escape plans that were finally realised in 1920. This was the stereotypical picture of the nobility that has remained with historians: repressed by the new regime, the Whites defeated, nobles fled the country, forming a large part of the voluminous emigration that spread across Europe, America and the world.

Many nobles, however, could not or did not want to leave their homeland. These nobles stress that they had to make a choice; they had to adapt to the new conditions and ideology or they would disappear into the dregs of society. Ekaterina Meshcherskaia (1904-1995) had enjoyed a luxurious lifestyle prior to 1917, but most of this, apart from some jewels, was lost

during the revolution. Her father was dead, her brother imprisoned, whilst she and her mother were left 'dazed' by events, living with friends, and distrusting and hating the new regime. Her mother, though, was determined not to be one of those 'shameful' and 'repulsive' nobles who resigned themselves to their fate, selling valuables on the black market, sinking into begging and destitution, whilst praying for the collapse of Bolshevik power. As the situation deteriorated in 1918, her mother searched for a job. Initially there were no jobs for 'princesses', but eventually she became a cook in a water-works in Rublevo, near Moscow. As a child, Meshcherskaia noted that she found it harder to adapt initially, finding the poverty incomprehensible and the future bleak. Her mother was far too busy with the unusual manual work to waste time worrying. The situation slowly improved; the management realised that her mother was literate and moved her into a supervisory role, whilst Meshcherskaia, although young, was able to earn money as a piano teacher. After little more than a year, they returned to Moscow, the mother to sing and give singing lessons, whilst Meshcherskaia continued to teach music.³⁰

In the early 1920s, Meshcherskaia wrote that while she regretted the October Revolution as she had lost many family members, she welcomed the opportunities that it provided. She was no longer expected to follow noble traditions and simply become a good wife; she could now lead a more satisfying life. In her later memoirs, she argued that she and her mother 'adapted', even if forced by events; useful employment changed them and the way that others perceived them.³¹ Nevertheless, the overall impression is less clear cut. Their relationship with other social groups appears problematic, based as it was on a need to hide their privileged past. Equally, her mother's transformation into a worker was clearly an unwilling one: 'useful' employment may have changed them, but the opportunity to return to Moscow was seized with both hands. The greater prominence posed dangers, but the work promised to be easier and more acceptable, drawing as it did on existing educational skills and cultural interests.

Some nobles responded by gathering in family or kinship groups to pool resources as they tried to survive and adapt. In one unusual case, a ‘colony’ of extended family members gathered in Bogoroditsk (Tula province, south of Moscow) after the revolution. Lev Bobrinskoi (1878-1922) and his family owned various estates around the town for centuries and were prominent local and national figures. They spent summer 1917, as usual, on their estate, but this time they also sought refuge from the revolutionary unrest in the main cities and stayed on into 1918 and beyond. Their experiences of the weak control of local Bolsheviks, alongside the plentiful supply of food, attracted numerous relatives to the estate. Bobrinskoi’s nephews, Kirill and Sergei Golitsyn (1909-89), and their families, lived in Petrograd and Moscow respectively after the October Revolution. Their fathers had found jobs (in an archive and a bank) to provide rations and money. But, as Bolshevik rule persisted and safety concerns came to the fore (Kirill’s father was periodically arrested in 1918-1919), they moved to Bogoroditsk. Sergei and his mother in the summer of 1918 (his father and grandparents followed later), whilst Kirill joined them in 1919. By then, seven Bobrinskoi, eleven Golitsyns and six Trubetskoi were in residence.³²

Bogoroditsk did provide security, although this diminished over time. Individuals obtained range of jobs with the rations and money earned helping to support the young and the old who could not work. A couple worked for local government in the health and land departments; several taught music, languages and other subjects in schools; whilst others found office-work.³³ The impression gained was that the family was of great help; rations and payments often failed to materialise, forcing the ‘colony’ to barter to obtain food from peasants. Sometimes bartering was hard and unsuccessful; sometimes there was nothing to barter; and sometimes individuals fell ill, with typhus being rampant. Yet, there were always family members willing to help. The situation changed, of course: initially (summer 1918) servants remained, and milk and food were easily available.³⁴ Towards the end of 1918, the Bolshevik threat grew steadily.

Attacks on the estate and the adjoining sugar factory grew in number, and the estate was searched with weapons confiscated and several arrested. Bobrinskoi's twin brothers were shot separately in 1920 and he died in a Bolshevik prison in 1922. Nevertheless, the 'colony' remained, staying in flats around the town in the early 1920s when they were forced from the estate. Similar examples can be seen elsewhere. A family 'clan' of between 20 and 35 people gathered on the estate of Vladimir Obolenskii (1869-1951) in the Crimea³⁵, whilst smaller groupings were common. Vivid descriptions remain for those around the Osorgins in Kaluga and the Volkonskiis in Petrograd.³⁶

These communities provided a degree of stability and facilitated the continuance of old practises and traditions alongside new concerns and worries. In Bogoroditsk, the young continued to be educated, usually by other family members. Sergei learned French from his grandmother and was also taught by his aunt, going elsewhere for the rest of his lessons with three of his relatives. In addition, cultural interests were pursued with an intensity that suggested that they were an escape from everyday fears and a therapeutic link to the past. These nobles dominated local events: they organized plays, operettas, reading circles and art shows. It was done openly, involving local intelligentsia such as teachers and administrators, and available to the public. Occasionally they even made money. Culture was 'ingrained' in their lives: it kept the family together, preserved their identity and provided a breath of fresh air from everyday life.³⁷

As Sergei admitted, they benefited hugely from the benign attitude of local Bolsheviks. He noted that it was important to find a 'tame' [ruchnoi] Communist to provide protection and that this often worked prior to the mid-1930s.³⁸ Relatively well-known examples during these years, especially for nobles with artistic or technical skills, were V. D. Bonch-Bruevich, L. B. Krasin, A. V. Lunacharskii, and the writer, Maxim Gorky. Gorky's wife, E. P. Peshkova, was also active. She helped the Osorgins several times, repealing a death sentences and aiding the family's emigration in 1931.³⁹ Bribery could also pay dividends, especially locally, but even

leading Communists could only do so much. Meshcherskaia described F. E. Dzerzhinskii, head of the secret police, as a ‘protector’ after her mother had voluntarily handed in a valuable painting. Apparently, he helped them on several occasions, but he was unable or unwilling to prevent them from being dismissed from jobs and arrested.⁴⁰ Active patronage, moreover, was different from simply appealing to leading figures when family members were arrested, which numerous nobles did. Ultimately, some nobles were helped, but the majority were not. By the 1930s, any association with ‘former people’ was dangerous. A. S. Enukidze, secretary of the Central Executive Committee of the Congress of Soviets, was specifically accused of helping former nobles and disenfranchised groups in 1935, leading to his downfall and death.⁴¹

Throughout these early years, therefore, there was a great deal of change, but it rarely involved ‘becoming Soviet’. All Russians struggled to survive and the biggest changes arose from everyday life; the need to find employment, food and housing, all of which were rarely concerns for nobles prior to 1917. By persecuting former nobles for their ‘non-toiling’, ‘exploiting’ background, the regime encouraged nobles to think that work was the main way to become accepted into the new society, particularly since opportunities existed. Nobles possessed valuable skills. Most spoke foreign languages, had experience of military or civil service, had an education ranging from law to sciences, and had cultural skills (music, dancing, riding and more) that new elites wanted to acquire.⁴² The Bolsheviks could not create a workers’ state overnight. Most workers and peasants remained illiterate, inexperienced or both. The regime needed skilled individuals to fulfil the demands of a rapidly expanding bureaucracy. In the 1920s, around 20% of bureaucrats and technical personnel across the state were elements from the old regime. In the People’s Commissariat of Agriculture, around 35% of its leadership in the 1920s had ‘noble’ backgrounds and many more were in lower level posts. It was not until 1928 that many were expelled.⁴³ The military also desperately required experienced officers during the civil war and

thousands of ex-tsarist officers served into the 1920s.⁴⁴ Furthermore, the Bolsheviks struggled to implement their policies effectively. Around 11-12% of landowners managed to retain a foothold on their former estates, even in their manor houses, into the mid-1920s. In 1925, a new campaign was launched to remove them; some, apparently, were still hiring labour and using excessive amounts of land. Thousands were expelled but up to 40% survived until collectivization at the end of the decade.⁴⁵ Even then, nobles noted that they were forced from their estates as ‘exploiters’, simply to find work in local government in the nearest towns.⁴⁶

Former nobles found work at all levels, from manual work to the highest military and scientific positions. Some nobles worked for the state because they actively supported its aims and objectives, whilst a few probably hoped to sabotage it from within. Others were careerists who recognized the opportunities for personal advancement in a fledgling state. More still, especially in the military, were quick to stress that they saw service in terms of serving their country, rather than the regime. Generally, nobles accepted the Soviet work ethic, however unwillingly. They saw the logic in the need to work and younger generations increasingly knew nothing else. And they were quick to promote themselves as ‘workers’. One former marshal of the nobility, protesting in 1918 about being classified as a bourgeois counter-revolutionary, argued that he was now a ‘worker’.⁴⁷ Newly-working nobles resented being persecuted for their past, but the regime remained unwilling to accept that nobles could ‘become Soviet’: as the secret police stated in 1918 to Valentin Zubov (1885-1969), the Director of the Institute of the History of Art, ‘it is true that you work for us, but all the same you’re not really with us’.⁴⁸ For former nobles, the regime itself was too unstable at this stage to make it seem possible or necessary to forge new, long-term identities, whilst the past was too immediate to be completely rejected.

The NEP Years, 1921-1928

The important years, therefore, came after the end of the civil war in 1921. On the one hand, the regime's permanency became evident as open opposition faded. All nobles remaining in Russia were forced to consider the longer term, even if they continued to believe in the regime's eventual failure and downfall. On the other hand, to stabilise its position and aid Russia's development, the regime promoted the New Economic Policy (NEP). This introduced some freedom (by partly reverting to capitalism) into the economy, alongside a relative relaxation in the repression and violence that had characterised the civil war years. The regime continued to target the nobility, along with other *lishentsy* and opposition groups, but initially at least the NEP seemed to provide greater opportunities. For Kirill Golitsyn, the NEP was the first 'reasonable' action of the government. It prompted widespread and sincere relief among nobles, as it became easier to obtain food and other goods. Older generations recalled a 'blissful' period between the revolutionary years and the growing repression of the late 1920s. Younger nobles saw it as chance to move forward, as it offered opportunities for education and better jobs.⁴⁹ In Kirill's case, it provided an opportunity to leave Bogoroditsk to search for more rewarding work elsewhere. He moved to Moscow in June 1920, training horses for the military with an uncle, and then to Petrograd and a job in the company controlling the railway to Murmansk. He held down various other jobs, before managing to enter into an architectural institute in Moscow.

Other members of Bogoroditsk community also saw the NEP as the dawn of a new era. Sergei Golitsyn's family moved back to Moscow in 1922, the year in which Sergei turned 13, hoping that he and his siblings could benefit from a better education in the capital. His siblings entered university and Sergei was enrolled at the school his sisters had attended before 1917. Restrictions on entry had been lifted to accept males, but many of the old teachers remained and

the education remained thorough. A rigorous interview process also remained. Although focused now on educational ability rather than social background, it undoubtedly removed less desirable elements of the population. Sergei was referred to as a *burzhui* [bourgeois] and suffered teasing, but he did not feel an outcast as other titled children also attended. In fact, only one boy in the class was from purely working-class parents. There were youth branches of the Communist Party (Pioneers for the younger children, Komsomol for the older ones), but primarily as vehicles for social activities and trips, such as one to Lenin's mausoleum not long after it opened.⁵⁰

As *lishentsy*, higher levels of education were officially forbidden but, as elsewhere, policies were implemented haphazardly.⁵¹ Some nobles were refused access and a few émigrés from the early 1920s cite this as a reason for their departure. Petr Karpushko (b. 1900) moved to Petrograd in 1922 to study in an institute there, but was refused entry on account of his background. His only chance of further study seemed to lie in emigration.⁵² Others noted that 'as a rule' nobles were forbidden, before describing how they faced few problems.⁵³ Some used personal connections, bribery or concealed their social origins.⁵⁴ Lidiia Zemlianin (b.1914) was refused access to an institute in Moscow in 1930 (her father was an ex-tsarist officer and her step-father was an engineer – a 'bourgeois specialist'). After working for five years as a seamstress and attending night school, she was finally accepted into university as 'worker' and studied geology. There she met her future husband, also a noble, who had worked as a coal miner before using his 'worker' status to gain entrance. Berezhnaia, despite an active role in Komsomol, was still refused access to university in 1930. She worked in an arms factory in Tula, becoming a shock-worker and party activist, before gaining entrance in the mid 1930s.⁵⁵

Nobles recognized that education could be a means of advancement in Soviet Russia. This was reflected in the changing choices of subject matter. Prior to 1917, law was the most popular subject at university for nobles, although few became lawyers. By the 1920s, more nobles were

studying vocational subjects: Kirill Golitsyn gravitated towards architecture; Sergei Golitsyn towards accountancy; and Zemlianin to geology. The need to find jobs forced nobles to accept the vocational priorities of the regime. Nevertheless, older generations continued to stress traditional subjects to their children, even if they were forced to teach them in private. Young nobles studied music, ballet, dancing, literature, poetry, history and languages as before; Sergei Golitsyn was reading Jules Verne, Shakespeare and Walter Scott, as well as Russian classics.⁵⁶ Equally, nobles of all ages saw cultural activities as an essential part of life.⁵⁷ They read Russian and European classics, and visited the theatre, ballet and opera whenever money allowed.

Aspects of traditional culture were championed by the regime at various times, but noble activities went much further. Figes argued that émigrés had two different notions of Russia; the land itself, and its culture and language. Continued involvement in the latter helped nobles to live anyway and remain Russian.⁵⁸ This feeling was shared by nobles within the Soviet Union. The government was alien to them, as was much of everyday life, but culture was a means to retain links to their past and their ‘Russia’. It also provided material support.⁵⁹ The revolution destroyed old conventions preventing nobles from earning a profession from the arts. Iurii Olsuf’ev (1878-1938) ignored his legal training after the revolution and spent the next twenty years working for various museums and workshops cataloguing, restoring and tracking down ancient paintings, writing numerous books on the subject. From 1934 until his final arrest in 1938 for spreading ‘anti-soviet rumours’, he worked for the famous Tret’iakov gallery in Moscow.⁶⁰ Some nobles taught literature, music or languages in schools or to the new elites, whilst younger nobles were free to enter the artistic world. They acted, sang, danced, wrote, painted and researched. These were challenging pursuits that provided some independence from the state, whilst preserving previous interests. Theatres, museums, universities and the Academy of Sciences became well known havens for former people during the 1920s and 1930s.⁶¹

Moreover, many nobles continued to live and socialize with other nobles. Vladimir Trubetskoi (1892-1937) lived in ‘aristocratic quarters’ in Sergiev Posad, alongside Goltisyns, Lopukhins, Naryshkins, Olsuf’evs, Raevskii and other former noble families. His flat became a cultural centre – acting, music and story-telling. He contributed to journals, played the piano in a cinema and performed in a band in a restaurant.⁶² Kirill Golitsyn described how life buzzed with excitement before his arrest in 1923, with frequent parties, trips to the opera, concerts, theatres, restaurants and coffee shops. Indeed, only the lack of money curtailed their activities.⁶³ Galina fon Mekk (1891-1985) wrote that the mid-1920s were the only years that she could call ‘in any way “happy”’ after 1917, positioned as they were between the sporadic arrests of her and her father (a railway specialist) that had persisted from 1918 to 1924, and her father’s final arrest and execution in 1928. She earned money from literary translations, whilst her circle of relations and friends met regularly to dance the foxtrot, discuss literature and perform plays.⁶⁴

All young people were enjoying life after the revolutionary turmoil. An official report estimated that around 71% of young workers in Leningrad liked dancing in 1929, with 46% frequently going to clubs and 11% even paying for lessons. Cafes and restaurants flourished, whilst western clothes, music and dances became fashionable.⁶⁵ Significantly, though, nobles chose to socialize with other nobles. Sergei Golitsyn described an active social scene in the late 1920s among former nobles in Moscow. Searches and arrests are overshadowed in his account by weekly social gatherings at each other’s flats. Sergei’s sister, Mariia, acquired a gramophone at this time and this formed the hub of their social life as they learned the foxtrot. He frequently visited the theatre, dressed up in dinner jackets and starched shirts for ‘balls’, and dined at restaurants when he could afford it. He also went on trips to visit friends in Iaroslavl’ and Vologda. By 1929, Golitsyn was living in a house with nine other nobles, including a former governor, marshal of the nobility and several former landowners.⁶⁶ Sergei Raevskii (1907-2004)

also described various entertainments, including ‘salons’ and a ‘masquerade ball’.⁶⁷ There is little evidence to suggest any significant changes in the mentality or practises of these former nobles.

This impression is reinforced by looking at continuities in religious belief. Despite its suppression by the regime, the church continued to be a significant part of the lives of many nobles. Families continued to gather as before at Christmas and particularly Easter. Some nobles refused to let their children go to school on traditional dates for church holidays after the calendar had been changed in 1918.⁶⁸ Sergei Golitsyn’s family went to church every Sunday when in the provinces and this continued after they moved to Moscow in 1922. His uncle, M. M. Osorgin, worked to foster religious belief in his relatives’ children, ensuring that Sergei and others had a thorough knowledge of the old and new testaments. It succeeded. Church became part of the lives of these young nobles during the late 1920s. Sergei and others visited religious sites in a trip to the provinces north of Leningrad in an account that reads like a pilgrimage in his memoirs, but also served as a social event. During interrogations in the late 1920s, Sergei wrote that he was prepared to denounce the Tsar and declare his support for the regime, but he would not lie about his religious beliefs.⁶⁹ Ol’ga Sheremeteva (1885-1941) continued to live in the Sheremetevs’ family palace in Moscow throughout this period, a stone’s throw from the Kremlin, earning a living from teaching languages, lecturing on historical and cultural subjects, and cataloguing in the State Museum of Literature. Her diaries portray an active religious scene. She joined marches protesting at the separation of church and state in 1918; she hoped for a revival of religion as congregations increased at the onset of the NEP in 1921; she mourned the death of the patriarch in 1925 in Donskoi Monastery with thousands of others; she and friends visited churches cataloguing and preserving icons in 1928; and Orthodox rituals played a vital role in coming to terms with the death of a close family member in 1935. Throughout, she visited the same

churches and saw the same priests, whilst chronicling, step-by-step, the state's persecution of the church, from the destruction of buildings to the imprisonment of priests.⁷⁰

This commitment to a potentially dangerous activity was matched by Dmitrii Panin (1911-87). Growing up in Moscow in the 1920s within an intellectual family that mixed with educated and professional people, the Bolsheviks were seen as 'godless' people. Religion was one of the differences that he noted between those who fled Russia and those who remained; émigrés had church and culture, whilst he and his friends witnessed the destruction of religion, morality and order. Panin claimed that he stood up for his beliefs as he left school and the family to work in a cement factory from 1928 onwards. Other nobles, in his estimation, were more interested in university, marriage and a quiet life than standing up for their beliefs, however dangerous these were. Panin was a member of Komsomol because it was necessary to survive but, as he trained as an engineer in the 1930s, he consistently refused to join the party. His colleagues thought him young and naïve, but he equated religion to education, culture and progression. He was imprisoned in 1940, beginning a long sentence in the Gulag.⁷¹

The 1920s were the years in which the examples cited at the beginning of this article – Bereznaia, Skriabina and Kirill Golitsyn – believed that they were 'becoming Soviet', but the true picture was uncertain. The regime certainly continued to view them as inherently anti-Soviet and acted to marginalise them. Arrests remained frequent and widespread, whilst imprisonment and exile become more common as the 1920s progressed. Few nobles were willing to enthusiastically endorse the regime. Sergei Trubetskoi (1890-1949), active in anti-Bolshevik organizations during the civil war, noted vaguely in his interrogation in August 1922 that the persistence of the regime so far seemed to demonstrate that it was 'a necessary phase' in Russia's historical development, but he was not a 'prophet' and had no idea what would happen in the future.⁷² By 1928, such non-committal responses were not enough to save nobles – even valuable

scientists, engineers and other specialists – as was demonstrated in the wide-ranging purge of ‘specialists’ in that year.⁷³ It proved fatal for many, such as fon Mekk’s father, as it spread across ministries, institutions and other technical organizations. Equally, throughout the 1920s, the regime also forced many former nobles to disappear into the anonymous mass of the population. Aleksei Bashkirov (1875-c.1937), for example, fled to his estate after the revolution with several family members. They were granted some land, but every year their position deteriorated. He remarried a peasant girl and remained in Russia when his daughters emigrated. He was forced to take odd jobs (wood cutting, local government work and others). A divorce followed and then, in 1928, his house burned down, leaving him destitute by the time it was rebuilt. A mixture of unskilled rural and urban work continued into the 1930s, with Bashkirov barely making ends meet until he disappeared in 1937 with his brother (probably into the Gulag).⁷⁴

The regime, though, did not have to eliminate nobles to prevent them from becoming Soviet, simply ensuring instability was sufficient. Former nobles were forced from one job to another, shifting locations, frequently arrested and often exiled. Meshcherskaia spent the 1920s variously working as a music teacher, kindergarten teacher, textile worker, private language teacher, or was unemployed.⁷⁵ Mariia Meiendorf (1869-1962) spent most of the 1920s giving private lessons in Odessa simply to be arrested and exiled in 1927. She moved to Ural’sk to join her cousins, obtaining a post teaching mathematics in a local school and gave private lessons to the son of a local police official. She remained after her exile had officially ended in 1931 but lost her job in a dispute over finances. She returned to the Odessa region, teaching German at a village school before returning to the city.⁷⁶ Kirill Golitsyn’s studies in an architectural institute were short-lived as he was imprisoned from 1923 to 1928. He held a series of short-lived jobs in Moscow’s cultural world in the 1930s, married in 1931 and had two children, but was imprisoned

again in 1941 and unable to return to Moscow on his release in 1949.⁷⁷ Even enthusiastic and loyal supporters, like Berezhnaia, were unable to initially enter higher education and other areas.

Beyond calling themselves ‘workers’ in the 1920s, there is little sense that many of the nobles described above attempted to ‘become Soviet’ in any other way. They took advantage of the opportunities provided by the NEP to enjoy lifestyles that maintained many traditional elements. Above all else, these nobles continued to be associated with other nobles. They even gravitated towards each other in prison. During the revolution and civil war, it was easy to meet acquaintances in prison, but this was still possible in the 1920s. Kirill was imprisoned with his father in 1923 and became part of a noble ‘kolkhoz’ in cell 8 of the Butyrka prison in Moscow. They pooled resources and supported one another to survive. Georgii Osorgin (1893-1929) joined the cell on his imprisonment in 1925. At that time, twenty four people were involved, mostly relatives like Kirill, or friends and acquaintances.⁷⁸

The Years of Terror, 1928-1941

Although the attack on specialists in 1928 affected many nobles, the 1930s heralded a succession of more substantial threats. According to Meshcherskaia, 1933 was the darkest year yet due to new internal passports.⁷⁹ There were already restrictions on movement, but in December 1932 internal passports were introduced as further means of controlling the population. This policy was implemented throughout 1933. Initially affecting a few major cities, by the end of the 1930s it had spread to 37 cities and industrial centres, as well as frontier zones. Thousands were denied passports or fled to avoid applying for them; a sizeable proportion of the 3% denied in Moscow and as many as 10% in Kiev and Baku were former nobles.⁸⁰ Meshcherskaia and others, including Meiendorf, were refused passports, imprisoned and forced to wait before reapplying.⁸¹

A more serious threat emerged for former nobles in Leningrad with the murder of Sergei Kirov, the local Communist leader, in December 1934. This prompted widespread repression across the city from February 1935 onwards. This encompassed all groups but particularly targeted 'former people'. Among the 4,833 'former people' targeted as heads of families, were 1,434 nobles (29.7%), including 67 princes, 44 counts and 106 barons, whilst over 11,000 'former people' were targeted in total.⁸² Skriabina described a 'purge' in the government institution where she worked, which removed many with undesirable pasts. She escaped, but a former landowner was arrested and exiled from their communal flat. She felt the need to hang a picture of V. M. Molotov, the Soviet leader whose real name was Skriabin, on their wall to foster doubts about her family's connections, even though Molotov was no relation. She wrote that by the end of these arrests the composition of the city changed, reflecting the arrests of friends and acquaintances.⁸³ Most were exiled or imprisoned, but worse fates were possible. Raevskii and his wife were arrested in 1935 for 'counter-revolutionary activities' as the arrests spread to Moscow. Their 'patron', Gorky's wife, Peshkova, could not help. He was incarcerated in a Gulag camp in North Siberia until 1939, living alongside an acquaintance, Aleksei Bobrinskoi, who was serving a ten year sentence. His wife was imprisoned in Moscow before being shot in 1937.⁸⁴

More than anything else, this purge illustrated how, by the 1930s, former nobles were dispersed across all levels of society and into all kinds of jobs. In Leningrad in 1935, Prince V. D. Volkonskii worked at a milk plant; Princess E. V. Gagarina was a secretary in a medical institute; Countess E. V. Tatishcheva was an instructor in 'visual aids'; Prince M. D. Volkonskii painted houses; Princess M. A. Alferaka gave lessons in drawing; Baron V. N. Taube was a bookkeeper at a factory; Baroness V. V. Knorring-Formen was nurse; and Count A. S. Lanskoi was an unskilled factory worker. Almost all of them, according to reports, suffered material hardships.⁸⁵ Moreover, these jobs were unlikely to have been their first. Across 1917-1941, the vast majority

of nobles changed their places of work several times and even their profession at least once. Many moved cities to try and utilize their skills, hobbies or personal connections to earn a living.⁸⁶ Yet, despite this, they had been ‘discovered’ by the regime.

Nevertheless, by the Great Terror in 1937-38, nobles were just one of numerous social groups, including the Communist leadership, who were affected. Indeed, the state recognized the changing nature of its search for enemies. Officially, the new constitution of 1936 stated that the regime had emerged victorious against class enemies and it restored the right to vote to everyone. Some nobles hoped that this constitution would prompt dramatic changes, but their hopes were largely ‘theoretical’⁸⁷; there was a relaxation in rationing and restrictions on education, but terror quickly gathered pace elsewhere.⁸⁸ This was inevitable – after all, the discussions over a new constitution began at the same time as the campaign against ‘former people’ in Leningrad. For nobles at least, state policies remained largely unchanged prior to 1941. Indeed, Sergei Golitsyn argued that whilst 1937 had the greatest impact on the whole country and upon historical memory, the years immediately after 1917 and even 1935 were worse for nobles.⁸⁹

Nonetheless, children of former nobles growing up in the 1930s continued to retain elements of nobles’ older identities. Lidiia Tolstaia (b.1921) had nothing but stories informing her of the past. Her father was Boris Tolstoi, a distant relative of the novelist. He obtained a job at the State Planning Commission in Moscow at the end of the civil war, his wife became a journalist, and her mother looked after Tolstaia and the household. Tolstaia enjoyed a happy childhood, but family stories made her aware of the trauma of the revolution. In addition, her life seemed to be dominated by the word ‘former’: ‘I used to hear the word *former* at every step. We got our bread at the former Filippov store, bought meat at the former Eliseev...Professor Ivanov, who lived in our house, was known as the former palace doctor...and Grandma was simply a “former person.” When was all of this and what had it been like? I often asked Grandma these

questions, and it turned out that it had all ended very recently – about ten or twelve years ago. And yet it was so unlike everything that surrounded me!’⁹⁰

Periodically, her mystical past came back to haunt her. The obvious example from her schooldays came in October 1932, when Tolstaia was refused entry into the Pioneers. One of the children’s parents had known her family when they had all lived in Baku during the civil war. Tolstaia’s parents were accused of mixing with intellectuals now condemned by the regime and, moreover, her grandmother spoke fluent French and had translated French poems. The latter was not such a problem – all knowledge could be used ‘in the service of the revolutionary class’, as one classmate grandly stated. But dubious acquaintances, few of whom Tolstaia actually knew, were a real problem. It was suggested that she could ‘disassociate’ herself from her parents’ ‘incorrect actions’, but she would not. Tolstaia was ‘terribly ashamed’ and embarrassed, vowing never to return to school. Tolstaia’s family quickly found out. Her father refused to act, probably aware of the dangers of drawing attention to the family, whilst her mother was too busy. Her grandmother ended up resolving the dispute, ending up with a seat on the parents’ committee.⁹¹

Tolstaia was proud to wear the red scarf of the Pioneers and stand with her classmates in celebrations marking the anniversary of the revolution and so on. As with Sergei Golitsyn in the 1920s, these organizations were the nearest that children got to a social life in the 1930s. They were the only safe way of gathering and provided a range of educational and social opportunities. As befitted her youth, she did not connect these bodies, in which she mixed with her friends, with political events. Thus, in 1937, Tolstaia jumped at the chance to go to a Pioneer summer camp in the Crimea, where she saw the sea for the first time, and went hiking and kayaking. In the same year, her father was arrested in the purges because of his social origins, her mother was forced to leave her job in journalism, and the family’s material position worsened. In the autumn, this was

all pushed to one side in the excitement of starting new school term. In her account, Tolstaia seemed surprised by these memories of such a significant year.⁹²

Tolstaia's account, therefore, reflects her ambiguous position. Her parents continued to stress old values; they considered that going to the theatre was 'a necessary element of a proper education', as were private ballet lessons, art school and an emersion in literature. She read Russian and European works in the late 1930s, from Pushkin, Bely and Akhmatova, to Dickens, Thackeray and Stendahl.⁹³ This was vital in raising a 'well rounded human being'.⁹⁴ To be sure, Pushkin was championed by the regime, which commemorated the centenary of his death with great fanfare, whilst Akhmatova retained popular appeal even if lacking official approval. But the extent of Tolstaia's knowledge and interests went far beyond her classmates. Nikolai Kamenskii (b. 1923) described a similar position, albeit in Tiflis. He mixed with children of all backgrounds at school, but at home he read Fennimore Cooper and Jules Verne, learned French, listened to opera and classical music, and celebrated church holidays.⁹⁵ At the same time, though, Tolstaia joined other young people in enthusiastically identifying with the idealism of Soviet propaganda. Industrialization was in full swing in the 1930s. Moscow was being rebuilt; churches and monasteries were replaced by building sites, whilst the metro system was taking shape. It heralded an exciting new world. According to Tolstaia, her friends devoured information about new hydroelectric dams on the Dnepr, new cities like Magnitogorsk, and five year plans – it all promised a very different future. Industrialization would eliminate all problems (from queues to repression), creating a better world. It was everyone's duty to participate.⁹⁶

These contradictions were highlighted during the Second World War. Many former nobles fought in the Red Army, some volunteering and some being conscripted. Most fought for their country, not the regime. Kamenskii and his father both served, the former volunteering for the front in 1941 when 17 years old. They were serving the 'fatherland' as their ancestors had

done. Meshcherskaia wrote patriotic songs – ‘forward, to victory’ and ‘our banner’.⁹⁷ Some had mixed experiences. Vladimir Trubetskoi’s son, Andrei (1920-2002), saw his father, elder sister, and other relatives perish in the terror of 1937. He was conscripted into the army in 1939 and was wounded not long after the USSR joined the war in 1941. Taken prison by the Germans, he was later released as they believed that a Russian prince was inherently anti-Soviet. He lived temporarily with relatives in Austria and Germany who had emigrated after 1917, but he spurned the opportunity to remain. He escaped, fighting his way back to Russia with the partisans in 1944. It was his duty to serve Russia as his ancestors had done. Yet, as with other POWs, Andrei was regarded by the regime as ‘surrendering’ to the enemy. After refusing to become an informer for the KGB he was sentenced in 1949 to ten years in the Gulag. He was released in 1955 during the amnesties after Stalin’s death and went on to marry Elena Golitsyna (b.1924), the niece of Sergei Golitsyn, raise five children and complete a doctorate in biology.⁹⁸

It is also worth noting that, almost forty years after the revolution, Andrei Trubetskoi married into another illustrious old noble family, the Golitsyns, thereby continuing centuries of links between the two families. Marriage patterns are difficult to quantify given the sporadic evidence. It has been argued that former nobles continued have higher expectations of potential marriage partners throughout this period; even if they were non-nobles, they tended to be well educated or artistically inclined.⁹⁹ This argument, based on a handful of interviews, is difficult to substantiate, but of twenty or so nobles discussed in this piece who married during this period, over half married other nobles, whilst several married non-nobles and the rest are unknown. Most non-noble partners were well-educated or artistic figures.

On the one hand, this seems surprising, as it would have been safer to marry lower social classes. There are, of course, examples of this happening; Berezhnaia married a worker, whilst Meshcherskaia entered into a sham marriage for protection in the 1930s.¹⁰⁰ Mostly this arose

from the breaking down of social barriers – as was the case with Bashkirov – rather than a conscious desire to marry someone from a different background. On the other hand, given that many nobles lived, worked and socialized together, as noted above, it seems hardly surprising that a significant number also chose to marry each other. They shared common experiences and fears, and ultimately had the same beliefs and interests. Marriage helped to preserve these beliefs and to transfer them across generations, aiding continuity over change.

Some nobles directly discussed marriage in their accounts. As noted earlier, Skriabina's mother was not impressed by the social background of her son's choice of bride in 1922 and the speed of the wedding. Skriabina claimed that such things were not an issue for her amid the realities of Soviet Russia, prompting her mother to accuse her of becoming 'sovietized'. Yet, when it came to Skriabina's own marriage, she rejected a potential suitor on account of his upbringing and manners. She eventually married a former tsarist officer at a Soviet registry office, before sealing the marriage in a church ceremony.¹⁰¹ Kira Obolenskaia's (b.1920) engagement to a former baron in 1937-38, then a composer, was welcomed wholeheartedly by her mother and grandmother, impressed by the groom's lineage. Looking back, Obolenskaia recognized that it was wonderful for her mother, after a hard day's work as a typist with people she would never have known prior to 1917, to spend an evening discussing cultural subjects in French, German, and English. Obolenskaia married young, not yet eighteen, but her family knew that they would struggle to find anyone as acceptable again.¹⁰² Many younger nobles also aspired towards getting married 'properly', and this included a suitable bride and church service.¹⁰³

Although lineage was a bonus, most former nobles were attracted to each other because they continued to value culture, education and manners above other concerns when searching for a marriage partner. Vladimir Trubetskoi highlighted this in letters written in 1934-35 to his nephew, Vladimir Golitsyn, from his place of exile in Andizhan, Uzbekistan. The key factor was

‘suitability’. He shared his nephew’s concern about the marriage of Sergei Golitsyn, providing an unfavourable description of the looks and speech of his non-noble bride. This was not explicitly class-orientated, but it reflected fears that different backgrounds and interests would harm the union. Trubetskoi valued ‘decency and honesty’, but such values were more common among certain social groups. He despaired of finding suitable partners for his own daughters in Andizhan. The local youth were ‘extremely vulgar, endlessly democratic, uncultured, and poorly educated. It will end with my having the type of son-in-law that would be a disgrace to display to any decent person.’ He noted that ‘there is not a single appropriate suitor’ in the whole city. He feared his daughters would therefore ‘naturally’ be enticed by some inappropriate ones.¹⁰⁴

Ultimately, a ‘good’ marriage was essential if former nobles were to retain a distinct identity. Vera Nilaev explicitly stated this, but her efforts ended in vain as many undoubtedly did. Losing the family house in Moscow after the revolution, she fled, with her four children, to the family’s dacha. Her husband having died, she worked hard to maintain the family, rearing chickens and rabbits in the dacha’s garden, and working at a local factory. Yet, escaping to the countryside backfired. Her three sons all ended up marrying illiterate rural girls. Although Nilaev recognized that they were good mothers, she saw the marriages as misalliances. As the family’s material position worsened, the marriages were another factor that made the younger generation indistinguishable from the village population (just as it did for Bashkirov, described above, when he married a peasant girl). Other blows came when one of her sons abandoned religion as two of his children died of illness, whilst another son succumbed to alcoholism. Nilaev’s worse fears had been realised; by the 1940s-1950s, the men were all factory workers and the women were all cooks or childminders. There was no sign of the family’s past.¹⁰⁵

Conclusion

This article aimed to analyse levels of continuity and change in the activities and beliefs of former nobles during this period to examine the extent to which they were ‘becoming Soviet’. In the end the picture remains mixed. Overall, their accounts largely conform to the standard narrative of the period: the violence of the civil war; relative thaw in the 1920s; renewed repression from 1928; the Great Terror of 1936-38; and the mixed motives for fighting in the Second World War. To be sure, various nobles usefully note that other dates (1918-1919 and 1935, for example) were worse for certain social groups, whilst targeted sweeps of cities or districts made other dates memorable for some. But nobles were susceptible to arrest and imprisonment at all times. In response, former nobles changed in order to survive, as did all Russians in some way. Most obviously, nobles became workers. By the 1930s, most former nobles had held several jobs, often in more than one region of the USSR and in all areas of the labour market: government officials, officers, factory workers, teachers, scientists, painters, builders and so on. They also changed their living habits, sharing communal flats, eating whatever was available and struggling for money.

Looking at these issues, Smirnova argued that former nobles were able to ‘integrate’ into Soviet society, but found the process complex and varied, whilst their social past was always a threat.¹⁰⁶ But did this mean that they had ‘become Soviet’? Golitsyn and Skriabina believed so, whilst Meshcherskaia also highlighted work as the main element of change. Contemporary petitions suggest that nobles increasingly saw themselves as ‘workers’ once they had got a job. This, they believed, entitled them to acceptance in the new state. And in some respects, their arguments are justified given the regime’s emphasis on the duty of all Russians to work and to be productive citizens. In the state’s eyes, though, former nobles remained tainted by their social

past and the views that this past was supposed to foster. The state expected more; as well as being workers, it wanted Russians to reshape their beliefs and practises. Many nobles undoubtedly did, like Berezhnaia, but many others did not. These nobles, including Golitsyn and Skriabina, continued many traditional practises in terms of education, culture, religion and other elements. Some historians have argued that the regime undertook a 'great retreat' in the 1930s, embracing many of these elements itself as it restored the primacy of the family, traditional educational practises and so on.¹⁰⁷ This has been heavily debated and there is certainly no sense that the regime approved of the activities of nobles described above. Moreover, even in the late 1930s, many children of former nobles were growing up in a distinct environment from other children, even if their material position was the same or worse.

There were, of course, differences within the examples discussed above. Older nobles were less dynamic than younger nobles. The focus in their accounts is strongly on survival, whereas younger nobles stress their desire to build 'ordinary' lives. The young are always better able to adapt; it was easier for them to find work and cope with everyday life. Moreover, those coming of age during the NEP were encouraged by the opportunities that it seemed to provide and were more likely to accept the permanency of the regime. Otherwise, though, the differences were less pronounced than might be expected. Older nobles continued social and cultural practises largely because they were ingrained, but increasingly many younger nobles adopted them as well. Equally, the experience of men and women are not as distinct as some have suggested. Oral evidence suggested that it was easier for women to adapt; they posed a smaller political threat, it was easier for them to retrain, and they could marry into new elites.¹⁰⁸ The examples above do not support this to any great extent. Most female nobles also experienced imprisonment and exile during this period. Most struggled as much as men to adapt to jobs, given few of them had worked prior to 1917. Few showed any more inclination to marry lower social

classes than men. There may have been bigger distinctions between nobles living in the cities, especially Leningrad and Moscow, and those living in rural Russia. Bashkirov and Nilaev provide the only evidence of the latter here, but both suggest that it was harder for former nobles to retain a distinct identity in rural Russia. The elements stressed by nobles elsewhere – culture, education and social interaction – were hard to maintain in Russia's vast countryside.

Ultimately, nobles retained the strong division between the public and the private that many Russians did. Fitzpatrick has argued that all Russians reinvented themselves and their history to create a self (or a public mask) that could survive the dangers and take advantage of the opportunities as no-one was immune from the repression.¹⁰⁹ Nobles agreed; as von Meck stated, everyone 'lived a double life, wearing a mask when outside our homes, taking it off only when we knew that it was safe to do so.'¹¹⁰ In public, nobles became workers and refrained from opposition. Most did not believe in the regime, but it has been argued that many Russians inwardly rejected official values, even communists.¹¹¹ In private, nobles carried on with their lives. There were changes, but there were also strong elements of the past. By the 1930s, elements of change and continuity had combined to create a distinct identity for younger nobles. Publicly, they could not be isolated from wider society and the country's ambitions but, privately, strong influences at home succeeded in transmitting traditional values and practises.

Many of these practises seem, in hindsight, to be risky, drawing unnecessary attention to former nobles at a time when this could prove fatal. Some, such as Panin, did see themselves as subverting the regime through their actions. Others would argue that one cannot suddenly stop believing in God, for example, especially given that they did not believe in Communism. Equally, Fitzpatrick has observed a certain 'risk-taking' mentality among all Russians. There was not as much caution as one would expect because there was little evidence that caution guaranteed survival.¹¹² As the events of 1935 demonstrated, no matter where nobles worked, their

background continued to haunt them. Moreover, when even loyal communists were being arrested, there was little incentive for nobles to dramatically change. In their accounts, the state is an ever-present factor that cannot be controlled and contemporaries accepted explanations that historians distrust; namely, that survival was often down to chance and luck.

In the end, though, certain practises and qualities were seen as being 'noble' and former nobles did not question continuing them. G. Kicheev (1906-78) did not enjoy the benefits of many of the former nobles described above. He lacked a good education and became a footballer and then a chauffeur. But, conscious of his roots, in the words of his son, he acquired 'aristocratic' traits – that is, he educated himself, read foreign literature and historical works, and took up cultural pursuits such as music. Just as new Soviet elites had tried to acquire the 'elite' skills after 1917, Kicheev believed that noble attributes could be reclaimed.¹¹³ Rather than 'becoming Soviet', many former nobles simply wanted to remain themselves. Many were surprisingly successful, suggesting that continuity played a significant role alongside change in early Soviet society.

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- ¹ S. Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as Civilization* (Berkeley, 1995), 225-30.
- ² S. Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism. Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (Oxford, 1999); and S. Fitzpatrick, *Tear off the Masks! Identity and Imposture in Twentieth Century Russia* (Princeton, 2005).
- ³ S. Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia: Terror, Propaganda and Dissent, 1934-1941* (Cambridge, 1997); and L. Viola (ed.), *Contending with Stalinism: Soviet Power and Popular Resistance in the 1930s* (Ithaca, 2002).
- ⁴ I. Halfin, *Terror in My Soul: Communist Autobiographies on Trial* (Cambridge, MA, 2003); and J. Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin* (Cambridge, MA, 2006).
- ⁵ A. Krylova, 'The Tenacious Liberal Subject in Soviet Studies', *Kritika*, Vol. 1 (2000), 119-46.
- ⁶ As did elements of everyday life: N. Leбина, *Povsednevnaia zhizn' sovetskogo goroda. Normy i anomalii: 1920/1930 gody* (St. Petersburg, 1999).
- ⁷ D. Hoffmann, *Stalinist Values: The Cultural Norms of Soviet Modernity, 1917-1941* (Ithaca, 2003).
- ⁸ G. Alexopoulos, *Stalin's Outcasts: Aliens, Citizens, and the Soviet State, 1926-1936* (Ithaca, 2003); and T. Smirnova, "Byvshie liudi" sovetskoi Rossii: strategii vyzhivaniia i puti integratsii, 1917-1936 gody (Moscow, 2003).
- ⁹ A. Berezhnaia, 'Overcoming an "Incorrect" Birth' in B. Engel and A. Posodskaya-Vanderbeck (eds.), *A Revolution of Their Own: Voices of Women in Soviet History* (Boulder, 1998), 101-16.
- ¹⁰ E. Skryabina, *Coming of Age in the Russian Revolution* (New Brunswick, 1985), 54. Several of her memoirs were first published in English. The Russian edition adds nothing new [E. Skriabina, *Stranitsy zhizni* (Moscow, 1994)].

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- ¹¹ K. Golitsyn, *Zapiski kniazia Kirilla Nikolaevicha Golitsyna* (Moscow, 1997), 148-9.
- ¹² This article draws directly upon over thirty personal accounts from former nobles, but many more exist, especially for the immediate post-1917 period. The accounts used are from individuals who saw themselves as ‘noble’ prior to 1917 – not, for example, revolutionaries and others who had repudiated their noble backgrounds. Most are from the upper echelons of the pre-1917 nobility. There has been no attempt at selection, merely to read as many as possible.
- ¹³ S. Chuikina, ‘Dvoriane na sovetskom rynke truda (Leningrad, 1917-1941)’ in T. Vihavainen (ed.), *Normy i tsennosti povsednevnoi zhizni: stanovlenie sotsialisticheskogo obraza zhizni v Rossii, 1920-30-e gody* (St. Petersburg, 2000), 151-92.
- ¹⁴ Smirnova, op. cit., 6.
- ¹⁵ N. Zemon Davis and R. Starn, ‘Introduction’, *Representations*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (1989), 2.
- ¹⁶ G. Egerton, ‘The Politics of Memory: Form and Function in the History of the Political Memoir from Antiquity to Modernity’ in G. Egerton (ed.), *Political Memoir: Essays on the Politics of Memory* (London, 1994), 1-27.
- ¹⁷ Halfin, op. cit., ix; Hellbeck, op. cit., 11-12.
- ¹⁸ B. Walker, ‘On Reading Soviet Memoirs: A History of the “Contemporaries” Genre as an Institution of Russian Intelligentsia Culture from the 1790s to the 1970s’, *The Russian Review*, Vol. 59 (2000), 329.
- ¹⁹ R. Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (Cambridge, MA., 1960), 5-8.
- ²⁰ J. Olney, cited in P. Fritzsche, ‘The Case of Modern Memory’, *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 73 (2001), 98.

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- ²¹ Y. Slezkine, 'Lives as Tales' in S. Fitzpatrick and Y. Slezkine (eds.), *In the Shadow of Revolution: Life Stories of Russian Women from 1917 to the Second World War* (Princeton, 2000), 20.
- ²² I. Paperno, 'Personal Accounts of the Soviet Experience', *Kritika*, Vol. 3 (2002), 577-610.
- ²³ C. Merridale, *Night of Stone: Death and Memory in Russia* (London, 2000), 417-20.
- ²⁴ D. Koenker, 'Scripting the Revolutionary Worker Autobiography: Archetypes, Models, Inventions, and Markets', *International Review of Social History*, Vol. 49 (2004), 372.
- ²⁵ D. Bertaux, 'Transmission in Extreme Situations: Russian Families Expropriated by the October Revolution' in D. Bertaux and P. Thompson (eds.), *Pathways to Social Class: A Qualitative Approach to Social Mobility* (Oxford, 1997), 230-58; and E. Foteeva, 'Coping with Revolution: The Experiences of Well-to-do Russian Families' in D. Bertaux, P. Thompson and A. Rotkirch (eds.), *On Living Through Soviet Russia* (London, 2004), 68-90.
- ²⁶ On *lishentsy* see Alexopoulos and Smirnova. See also A. Dobkin, 'Lishentsy: 1918-1936', *Zven'ia: istoricheskii al'manakh* (2 volumes: Moscow-St Petersburg, 1992), II, 600-28; E. Kimerling, 'Civil Rights and Social Policy in Soviet Russia, 1918-1936', *The Russian Review*, Vol. 41 (1982), 24-46; and V. Tikhonov et al. (eds.), *Lishenie izbiratel'nykh prav v Moskve v 1920-1930e gody* (Moscow, 1998).
- ²⁷ Dobkin argued that 'former people', including nobles, peaked in the mid 1920s as around 30% of *lishentsy* before declining to 2-4% by the early 1930s (op. cit., 605-6). It is impossible to isolate nobles from other *lishentsy* and calculate how many remained in Soviet Russia. The regime used categories – former officials and officers, for example – that included other social estates as well as nobles, whilst many simply remained hidden from view.
- ²⁸ Nobles were unlikely to succeed in their appeals; Alexopoulos, op. cit., 36-7, 97.

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- ²⁹ I. Elenevskaia, 'Recollections' in Fitzpatrick and Slezkine, op. cit., 133.
- ³⁰ E. Meshcherskaya, *Comrade Princess* (London, 1990), 17-98. Her memoirs first appeared in *Novyi Mir*, 4 (1988), 198-242, whilst subsequent Russian editions include additional material; E. Meshcherskaia, *Vospominaniia kniazhny E. Meshcherskoi* (Moscow, 2000) and *Kitti (memuarnaia proza kniazhny Meshcherskoi)* (Moscow, 2001).
- ³¹ Meshcherskaia, *Kitti*, 124-5; Meshcherskaya, *Comrade Princess*, 84.
- ³² K. Golitsyn, op. cit., 129. Also S. Raevskii, *Piat' vekov Raevskikh* (Moscow, 2005), 196.
- ³³ S. Golitsyn, *Zapiski utselevshego* (Moscow, 1990), 50-1, 66-7, 96-8. K. Golitsyn, op. cit., 127-8.
- ³⁴ S. Golitsyn, op. cit., 18-20.
- ³⁵ V. Obolenskii, *Moia zhizn', moi sovremenniki* (Paris, 1988), 583-6.
- ³⁶ On the Osorgins, see S. Schmemann, *Echoes of Native Land* (London, 1997); and G. Trubetskoi, *Gody smut i nadezhd, 1917-1919* (Montreal, 1981), 46-72. On the Volkonskiis, see P. Wolkonsky, *The Way of Bitterness* (London, 1931); and S. Wolkonsky, *My Reminiscences* (2 volumes: London, 1925), II. Also M. Rendle, 'Family, Kinship and Revolution: The Russian Nobility, 1917-1923', *Family and Community History*, Vol. 8 (2005), 35-47.
- ³⁷ K. Golitsyn, op. cit., 133-7; S. Golitsyn, op. cit., 14-22, 50-3, 73-88, 103-4, 225-6.
- ³⁸ S. Golitsyn, op. cit., 25. Also Smirnova, op. cit., 59-60.
- ³⁹ Schmemann, op. cit., 250, 253-4, 264-5.
- ⁴⁰ Meshcherskaia, *Kitti*, 65-7; Meshcherskaya, *Comrade Princess*, 22, 24, 105.
- ⁴¹ Fitzpatrick, *Tear off the Masks*, 199-200.
- ⁴² See Chuikina, op. cit., 162, 179-84, but this did not give nobles the control over their futures that she implied.

⁴³ W. Chase, *Workers, Society, and the Soviet State: Labour and Life in Moscow, 1918-1929* (Urbana, 1990), 122-3; J. Heinzen, *Inventing a Soviet Countryside: State Power and the Transformation of Rural Russia, 1917-1929* (Pittsburgh, 2004), 68, 98, 112, 255. A systematic campaign against such 'specialists' started in 1928.

⁴⁴ For varying figures, see A. Kavtaradze, *Voennye spetsialisty na sluzhbe respubliki sovetov 1917-1920gg.* (Moscow, 1988), 70, 176-8, 210; S. Volkov, *Tragediia russkogo ofitserstva* (Moscow, 1999), 246-8; and J. Erickson, *The Soviet High Command* (Boulder, 1984), pp. 31-47, 56-8, 318-9.

⁴⁵ J. Channon, 'Tsarist Landowners after the Revolution: Former *Pomeshchiki* in Rural Russia during the NEP', *Soviet Studies*, Vol. 34 (1987), 575-98; Alexopoulos, op. cit., 251; and I. Trifonov, *Likvidatsiia ekspluatatorskikh klassov v SSSR* (Moscow, 1975), 63-90, 267-72.

⁴⁶ Raevskii, op. cit., 169.

⁴⁷ Smirnova, op. cit., 40.

⁴⁸ V. Zubov, *Stradnye gody Rossii: Vospominaniia o revoliutsii (1917-1925)* (Munich, 1968), 67-8.

⁴⁹ K. Golitsyn, op. cit., 147-9; S. Golitsyn, op. cit., 120-1; Raevskii, op. cit., 215-6, 235, 239.

⁵⁰ S. Golitsyn, op. cit., 149-54, 159-60, 210-1. Others mention noble teachers (Skrjabina, *Coming of Age*, 40-1) or schools filled with noble children (Raevskii, op. cit., 232-4).

⁵¹ D. Lane, 'The Impact of Revolution: The Case of Selection of Students for Higher Education in Soviet Russia, 1917-1928', *Sociology*, Vol. 7 (1973), 241-52. Also Chuikina, op. cit., 171-2; and Smirnova, op. cit., 260-1.

⁵² Interview in M. Glenny and N. Stone (eds.), *The Other Russia* (New York, 1990), 133.

⁵³ 'As a rule' is a frequently used term: for e.g., Raevskii, op. cit., 358

⁵⁴ See E. Almedingen, *Tomorrow Will Come* (London, 1961), 160-7; K. Golitsyn, op. cit., 156-7; S. Golitsyn, op. cit., 268; and D. Panin, *Zapiski solodina* (Frankfurt, 1973), 17-35.

⁵⁵ Bertaux, op. cit., 238-43; Bereznaia, op. cit., 106. Also Foteeva, op. cit., 83.

⁵⁶ S. Golitsyn, op. cit., 73-88.

⁵⁷ As did other elements of the pre-1917 intelligentsia, especially in traditional fields (theatre, ballet, opera and museums); K. Gerasimova and S. Chuikina, 'Ot kapitalisticheskogo Peterburga k sotsialisticheskomu Leningradu: izmenenie sotsial'no-prostranstvennoi struktury goroda v 30-e gody' in Vikhavainen, op. cit., 60-3.

⁵⁸ O. Figes, *Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of Russia* (London, 2002), 528.

⁵⁹ Chuikina, op. cit., 163-5, 181-2.

⁶⁰ Iu. Olsuf'ev, 'Iz nedavnego proshlogo odnoi usad'by', *Nashe nasledie*, Vols. 29-30 (1994), 91-3.

⁶¹ Chuikina, op. cit., 188. Various accounts by Sheremetevs show that many became involved in these areas; *Sheremetevy v sud'be Rossii: vospominaniia, dnevniki, pis'ma* (Moscow, 2003).

⁶² V. Trubetskoi, *A Russian Prince in the Soviet State* (Evanston, 2006), xiii-xiv. Also Raevskii's account.

⁶³ K. Golitsyn, op. cit., 156-70.

⁶⁴ G. von Meck, *As I Remember Them* (London, 1973), 245-69. She was imprisoned again from 1930-34.

⁶⁵ Lebina, op. cit., 260; A. Gorsuch, *Youth in Revolutionary Russia* (Bloomington, 2000), 120-5.

⁶⁶ S. Golitsyn, op. cit., 140-5, 268-367 (especially 281-8, 360-1). Also Meshcherskaia, *Kitti*, 143; and Skrjabina, *Coming of Age*, 78 (she loved dancing and could not wait for her weekly day off).

⁶⁷ Raevskii, op. cit., 253-4, 283-6, 310-6, 321-2, 329-31, 352-4.

⁶⁸ *Sheremetevy*, 349-50; Raevskii, op. cit., 240-2. Meshcherskaia wrote that ‘all of “former” Moscow’ went to a church near Nikitskie vorota (*Kitti*, 135-6, 139).

⁶⁹ S. Golitsyn, op. cit., 20, 164, 250, 281-2, 320-48, 370, 374-5.

⁷⁰ O. Sheremeteva, *Dnevnik i vospominaniia* (Moscow, 2005), 36-7, 91-7, 116-21, 126-31. P. Sheremetev (1871-1943), her cousin, actually lived in Novodevichy Monastery from 1927-c.1941 (*Sheremetevy*, 347-53). These beliefs were dangerous; in 1935, Skriabina’s mother hung icons in the communal kitchen, provoking the ire of a communist official living in the flat, although without repercussions (Skriabina, *Coming of Age*, 84).

⁷¹ Panin, op. cit., 13-6, 20.

⁷² V. Makarov and V. Khristoforov (eds.), *Vysylka vmesto rasstrela. Deportatsiia intelligentsia v dokumentakh VChK-GPU, 1921-1923* (Moscow, 2005), 365-6. He was originally arrested in 1920, sentenced to 10 years and then partially released before being exiled abroad along with hundreds of intellectuals (including many nobles) in 1922 (see his *Minuvshee* [Paris, 1989], 191-243). On the deportations, see S. Finkel, ‘Purging the Public Intellectual: The 1922 Expulsions from Soviet Russia’, *The Russian Review*, Vol. 62 (2003), 589-613.

⁷³ Raevskii wrote that 1928 saw a ‘sharp’ change in the atmosphere (op. cit., 340-2, 388).

⁷⁴ Z. Bashkiroff, *The Sickle and the Harvest* (London, 1960), especially 215-223.

⁷⁵ Meshcherskaya, *Comrade Princess*, 237-48.

⁷⁶ M. Meiendorf, *Vospominaniia* (Valley Cottage, 1990). Irina Tatishcheva (b. 1900) also used her education to teach in exile in the Urals until she emigrated in 1932; N. Galitzine, *Spirit to Survive* (London, 1976), 88-193.

⁷⁷ K. Golitsyn, op. cit., 155-376.

⁷⁸ K. Golitsyn, op. cit., 172-223; Schmemann, op. cit., 254.

⁷⁹ Meshcherskaya, *Comrade Princess*, 105.

⁸⁰ G. Kessler, 'The Passport System and State Control over Population Flows in the Soviet Union, 1932-1940', *Cahiers du Monde Russe*, Vol. 42 (2001), 477-503; D. Shearer, 'Elements Near and Alien: Passportization, Policing, and Identity in the Stalinist State, 1932-1952', *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 76 (2004), 835-81; and M. Matthews, *The Passport Society: Controlling Movement in Russia and the USSR* (Boulder, 1993), 16-21.

⁸¹ Meshcherskaya, *Comrade Princess*, 105-12. Meiendorf, op. cit., 344-5. Forgeries were available but they were expensive, see Fitzpatrick, *Tear off the Masks*, 271-2.

⁸² V. Ivanov, 'Operatsiia "byvshie liudi" v Leningrade (fevral'-mart 1935g.)', *Novyi chasovoi: russkii voenno-istoricheskii zhurnal*, Vols. 6-7 (1998), 119. Also L. Rimmel, 'A Microcosm of Terror, or Class Warfare in Leningrad: The March 1935 Exile of "Alien Elements"', *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, Vol. 48 (2000), 528-51.

⁸³ Skrjabina, *Coming of Age*, 81-5.

⁸⁴ Raevskii, op. cit., 456, 481-3, 517, 576-7.

⁸⁵ Ivanov, op. cit., 123, 129. Fitzpatrick (*Tear off the Masks*, 49) gives other examples from 1935.

⁸⁶ Smirnova, op. cit., 179-80, 184-6.

⁸⁷ S. Golitsyn, op. cit., 646.

⁸⁸ Alexopoulos, op. cit., 169-84.

⁸⁹ S. Golitsyn, op. cit., 653.

⁹⁰ L. Libedinskaia, *Zelenaia lampa* (Moscow, 1966), 29. Her grandmother played a vital role in her upbringing, aiding her appreciation of traditional Russian and European culture. This was fairly common; see V. Semenova, 'Babushki: semeinye i sotsial'nye funktsii praroditel'skogo pokoleniia' in V. Semenova and E. Foteeva (eds.), *Sud'by liudei. Rossiia XX vek: biografii semei*

kak ob'ekt sotsiologicheskogo issledovaniia (Moscow, 1996), 343-9. N. N. Kamenskii's

grandmother also told him about the past that his parents concealed: N. Kamenskii, *Deviatyi vek na sluzhbe Rossii – iz istorii roda grafov Kamenskikh* (Moscow, 2004), 177.

⁹¹ Libedinskaia, op. cit., 49-61.

⁹² Ibid., 89-91.

⁹³ Ibid., 90.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 13-4.

⁹⁵ Kamenskii, op. cit., 178.

⁹⁶ Libedinskaia, op. cit., 61-5.

⁹⁷ Kamenskii, op. cit., 175, 179-86; Meshcherskaia, *Kitti*, 6.

⁹⁸ A. Trubetskoi, *Puti neispovedimy (vospominaniia, 1939-1955gg.)* (Moscow, 1997).

⁹⁹ Foteeva, op. cit., 79.

¹⁰⁰ Meshcherskaya, *Comrade Princess*, 245-46. Smirnova claims that this was common; op. cit., 207-08.

¹⁰¹ Skrjabina, *Coming of Age*, 54-6, 62, 66-7.

¹⁰² K. Petrovskaya, *Kyra* (London, 1961), 1-8.

¹⁰³ Meck, op. cit., 393-4, 398 (she described her sister's marriage as 'ill-suited' due to his background, 248-9); Raevskii, op. cit., 405.

¹⁰⁴ V. Trubetskoi, op. cit., 110, 113-4, 121, 131.

¹⁰⁵ Bertaux, op. cit., 235-8.

¹⁰⁶ Smirnova, op. cit., 270, 275.

¹⁰⁷ This theory was originally argued in N. Timasheff, *The Great Retreat: The Growth and Decline of Communism in Russia* (New York, 1946). It has been strongly contested in the books by Hoffmann and Kotkin cited earlier.

¹⁰⁸ Bertaux, op. cit., 254; Foteeva, op. cit., 85-7.

¹⁰⁹ Fitzpatrick, *Tear off the Masks*, 3-21.

¹¹⁰ Meck, op. cit., 412. See also Sergei Golitsyn's view that everyone led 'two lives'; op. cit., 28.

¹¹¹ Hoffmann, op. cit., 83-4.

¹¹² Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 221.

¹¹³ A. Kicheev, *Dvorianskaia intelligentsia* (Moscow, 1998), 168.