
This book, in addition to exploring the history of tobacco, and its cultivation, production and marketing, introduces the smoking experience in all of its social, cultural, sensory and physical manifestations under tsarist power until the collapse of the autocracy in the revolutionary era. Each chapter provides chronological information about smokers and the society around them, their understanding and presentation of their habit, and the emergence of papirosy (cigarettes) as a mass-use product in Russian society and culture. The author begins by examining the papirosa (cigarette) as a medical and moral problem, and then traces how cigarettes were marketed by presenting them as somehow “liberating”. Eventually she concludes that cigarettes became increasingly controversial, creating problems for those involved in the cigarette trade, smokers and reformers alike.

In Chapter I, “Cultivated”, the author talks about Russian-grown Turkish seed tobacco production, makhorka, and its primary user – the Russian military, and the spread of papirosy use to the general population. The chapter also points out that Russia’s first cigarettes, called pakhitosy, came from France in the 1830s and shows the connection of smoking to imperialism in Russia, the linking of mass consumption to the creation of a national symbol of the venture in popular culture, soldiers’ acquaintance with smoking as partners of imperial project, their strong associations with papirosy on the front lines, poster and newspaper advertising, smoking and its associations with Cossacks, bogatyr appeared in advertising, and the use of female bodies in tobacco advertising. According to the author, smoking was much more than merely a personal habit, but had imperial associations, and was even seen as an element of national identity that could help to unify Russia’s diverse society.

Chapter II, “Produced”, discusses the manufacture of Russian papirosy and the development of the tobacco industry stating that legalized sales started under Peter the Great, cultivation and production
in Russia was fostered by Catherine the Great, and how by the late eighteenth century Russia became a net exporter of tobacco. The chapter also examines how Russian tobacco factories continued to increase the number of women and child laborers working at lower wages to keep costs down, the work conditions in these factories, the resultant mass tobacco strikes and the violent response of factory owners.

Chapter III, “Tasted”, traces the paradoxical evolution of smoking in Russia – a habit that cut across all class and gender lines, yet also continued to depict strict social hierarchies. The brands of cigarette, the terminology associated with smoking, the accessories used and the places where one smoked were all indicators of a smoker’s social position. Cigarette advertising portrayed smoking as modern and liberating that gave one access to a more exclusive, liberal and consumer society. However, peasants, workers, women and even children were soon seen in tobacco advertising, making their claim to membership in this modern state.

Chapter IV, “Condemned”, examines the rise of the anti-tobacco movement in the late nineteenth century. Those opposed to the use of tobacco cited medical, psychological and national concerns about the effects of smoking on the health and morals of the general population, and its potential link to national decline. Besides objecting to the odor of tobacco, the movement argued that the poison in nicotine created moral and physical disabilities such as neurasthenia and degeneracy that could be passed on to the next generation, thus endangering not only the nation’s present but also its future.

Chapter V, “Contested”, talks about the arguments against tobacco, the general public disbelief of its dangers, and the emergence of approval for moderation in scientific literature. The author states that neither scientific researchers nor medical authorities took a definitive stand on smoking. Respectable smokers consuming high-priced tobacco with equally expensive accessories might be able to avoid the dangers of smoking through moderation or low inhalation. However, in contrast to the anti-tobacco movement’s depiction of smoking as physically and/or morally dangerous, these researchers and doctors suggested that smoking beneficial in treating boredom, nervousness and sexual weakness.

In the Epilogue, the author describes the changes in Russian smoking during the First World War and the Bolshevik Revolution. In this period any restrictions on smoking were rejected due to the general popular acceptance of smoking that had emerged. By this point Russia’s unique papirosy and the habit of smoking had become so ingrained in the nation’s social, political, economic and cultural life that only a massive effort by both the state and individual citizens would have any hope of countering it.

Tricia Starks book is well-written and lavishly illustrated and is an important contribution to the understanding of the manufacture, production, and role that tobacco had in late imperial and in the Revolutionary Russia. Particularly noteworthy is the level of detail that the author has provided on all these topics. This book is highly recommended for anyone interested in any aspect of smoking or the tobacco industry in Russia during the periods discussed.
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