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Building Civil Society One Brick at a Time: People's Houses and Worker Enlightenment in Late Imperial Russia*

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As voting rights and representative government expanded in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, reformers across Britain, the United States, and Europe created diverse institutions in pursuit of a common goal: preparing working people for participation in a democratic polity and civil society. Despite their wide variety, all of these institutions—settlement houses, people's palaces, the *Volksheim* in Germany and the *Volkshuis* in the Netherlands—used both education and entertainment as means to improve the minds and morals of the masses, while at the same time, it was hoped, building social and cultural unity.¹ In his influential 1998 book *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age*, Daniel T. Rodgers directs our

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¹ The settlement house movement began in 1884 in London with the opening of two institutions; although Oxford House opened first, Toynbee Hall enjoyed far greater fame and impact. Asa Briggs and Anne Macartney, *Toynbee Hall: The First One Hundred Years* (London, 1984); Seth Koven, *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London* (Princeton, NJ, 2004), chap. 5. Jane Addams founded Chicago's Hull House in 1889 after visiting Toynbee Hall, and additional settlement houses were quickly established in other American cities; see, for example, Harry P. Kraus, *The Settlement House Movement in New York City, 1886–1914* (New York, 1980), and Kevin Mattson, *Creating a Democratic Public: The Struggle for Urban Participatory Democracy during the Progressive Era* (University Park, PA, 1998). Similar institutions could be found throughout northern Europe; see Herman Nijenhuis, ed., *Hundred Years of Settlements and Neighborhood Centres in North America and Europe* (Utrecht, 1986), and Andrew Lees, *Cities, Sin, and Social Reform in Imperial Germany* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2002). The leftist-oriented Italian variant is the subject of Margaret Kohn's *Radical Space: Building the House of the People* (Ithaca, NY, 2003), esp. chap. 6.

attention to the many international connections among reformers, theorists, and policymakers concerned with the “social problem.”² Rodgers places the eastern boundary of his study at Berlin. What happens to our understanding of transnational social reform when his web of interactions is extended to Russia? With its absolutist political system, repressive laws, and hierarchical social structure, tsarist Russia seems an unlikely place for publicly sponsored institutions dedicated to civic education and moral improvement to flourish. But Russian social reformers not only paid close attention to European and American trends; they also sought to address many of the same problems that had inspired the founders of workers’ institutes, settlement houses, and similar institutions in the West.³

One of the most dynamic social reform movements of late imperial Russia centered around the establishment of institutions called people’s houses (*narodnye doma*). Like its Western counterparts, the people’s house was not a charitable institution but a civic initiative to elevate the urban and also, at least in Russia, the rural lower classes. A survey carried out just before the beginning of war in 1914 discovered 222 functioning people’s houses across the Russian empire, with an additional eighty-four under construction.⁴ One that had already opened was the Ligovsky People’s House (*Ligovskii Narodnyi Dom*, or LND), founded in St. Petersburg in 1903 by Countess Sofia Panina (1871–1956), a philanthropist, liberal, and future assistant minister in the Provisional Government in 1917. For several reasons Panina’s people’s house makes a good case study for the Russian variant of the international movement to elevate the masses. First, contemporaries regarded the LND, with its modern building housing a theater, public lectures, Sunday readings, educational programs, and even an astronomical observatory, as a model institution that represented the movement’s most progressive goals. A second reason is the abundance and diversity of surviving evidence about the LND. In addition to reports, letters, and recollections generated by its aristocratic founder and her collaborators, there is a variety of sources both critical and laudatory produced by its working-class visitors. This rich documentation makes it uniquely possible to compare what such institutions meant not just to

² Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge, MA, 1998).

³ A recent work that underscores the connections between Europe and Russia is Susan P. McCaffray and Michael Melancon, *Russia in the European Context, 1789–1914: A Member of the Family* (New York, 2005). For Western influences on social welfare see Adele Lindenmeyr, *Poverty Is Not a Vice: Charity, Society, and the State in Imperial Russia* (Princeton, NJ, 1996).

⁴ *Narodnyi dom: Sotsial’naia rol’, organizatsiia, deiatel’nost’ i oborudovanie Narodnogo Doma. S prilozeniem bibliografii, tipovykh planov, primernogo ustava i pervoi vsrossiiskoi ankety o narodnykh domakh* (Petrograd, 1918), 375–78.

their idealistic founders and staff but also to the working-class men and women who attended the classes, plays, lectures, and exhibits they organized.

A focus on one institution also facilitates an in-depth comparison of Russian and Western approaches to the “social problem.” This article argues that our understanding of liberal, civic reform in Europe and the United States in the early twentieth century, and of the transnational archipelago of institutions that reformers created, is enriched when the borders are extended to Russia. Generated by concern over the same processes of urbanization, proletarianization, and an expanding polity, the reformers’ civilizing mission crossed national boundaries. Panina and her collaborators used methods and pursued objectives similar to those of Jane Addams in Chicago or Viktor Böhmert in Dresden. At the same time, reformers differed on the importance to their mission of such factors as religion. They confronted different challenges, from ethnic diversity in American cities and rival initiatives from a mass socialist party in Germany to Russian workers’ relatively low literacy. Although many faced suspicion and hostility from government or church authorities, the nature, scale, and impact of repression varied. These diverse circumstances influenced both the kinds of institutions reformers devised and the success they attained, adding important national inflections to the international movement. By focusing on the history of the LND, it is possible to answer an important question: did people’s houses, settlements, and similar institutions require a preexisting democratic culture to achieve their goals? Or could they advance in their progressive mission even in conditions of authoritarian government and deep social fragmentation? The history of Russian people’s houses is especially revealing of how such experiments fared in nondemocratic societies, where a repressive, policing state blocked many forms of social initiative yet also served as a common enemy, uniting founders and workers in the common cause of social empowerment.

The history of people’s houses also yields fresh insights into issues central to understanding late imperial Russian development. Despite their numbers, they have received little scholarly attention in their own right. People’s houses appear briefly, as sites for popular entertainment, in studies of theater history, temperance, and mass leisure.⁵ Prerevolutionary predecessors of the Soviet-era “palace of culture,” people’s houses are also mentioned in works on working-class culture in the imperial period as well as in studies of the

⁵ Gary Thurston, *The Popular Theatre Movement in Russia, 1862–1919* (Evanston, IL, 1998); Eugene Anthony Swift, *Popular Theater and Society in Tsarist Russia* (Berkeley, 2002); Patricia Herlihy, *The Alcoholic Empire: Vodka and Politics in Late Imperial Russia* (Oxford, 2002), esp. chap. 2; Stephen P. Frank, “Confronting the Domestic Other: Russian Popular Culture and Its Enemies in Fin-de-Siècle Russia,” in *Cultures in Flux: Lower-Class Values, Practices, and Resistance in Late Imperial Russia*, ed. Stephen Frank and Mark Steinberg (Princeton, NJ, 1994), 74–107.

movement for adult education.⁶ They have been largely overlooked, however, in the historical literature on Russian civil society. The origins of autonomous public initiative in Russia may be found in the eighteenth century, with the establishment of elite learned societies similar to those in continental Europe.⁷ Despite restrictive laws and government suspicion, Russians continued to establish voluntary associations of all kinds until thousands of them dotted the landscape of the empire by the early twentieth century. These associations and the institutions they supported—orphans, schools, reading rooms, museums, volunteer fire brigades—filled local or national needs that Russians themselves identified, independent of government directives.⁸ After more than twenty years of productive research, historians still disagree about whether autocratic, economically backward Russia possessed the necessary prerequisites for a vigorous civil society. Historian Joseph Bradley insists on the vitality and impact of Russia's voluntary associations, pointing to how they promoted democratic practices, new horizontal social networks, and "society's capacity to talk to itself." Lutz Häfner, however, doubts whether Russia, a "primarily peasant country," possessed the necessary urban values and legal guarantees and a middle class large enough to sustain a civil society on more than a local scale.⁹ Another skeptic, Laura Engelstein, asserts categorically that "twentieth-century Russia—imperial, Soviet, or post-Soviet—lacked the

⁶ Lynn Mally, *Culture of the Future: The Proletkult Movement in Russia* (Berkeley, 1990); Mark D. Steinberg, *Proletarian Imagination: Self, Modernity, and the Sacred in Russia, 1910–1925* (Ithaca, NY, 2002), chap. 1; Susan Bronson, "Enlightening the Urban Poor: The Adult Education Movement and the Conference of 1908," *East/West Education* 13, no. 2 (Fall 1992): 89–107; Scott J. Seregny, "Zemstvos, Peasants, and Citizenship: The Russian Adult Education Movement and World War I," *Slavic Review* 59, no. 2 (2000): 290–315; L. C. Frid, *Kul'turno-prosvetitel'naia rabota v Rossii v dooktiabr'skii period* (Moscow, 1960).

⁷ Joseph Bradley, *Voluntary Associations in Tsarist Russia: Science, Patriotism, and Civil Society* (Cambridge, MA, 2009), chap. 2.

⁸ The historical literature on Russian civil society is now quite vast. In addition to Bradley, other influential works include Edith W. Clowes, Samuel Kassow, and James West, eds., *Between Tsar and People: Educated Society and the Quest for Public Identity in Late-Imperial Russia* (Princeton, NJ, 1991); Lindenmeyr, *Poverty Is Not a Vice*; Joseph Bradley, "Subjects into Citizens: Societies, Civil Society, and Autocracy in Tsarist Russia," *American Historical Review* 107, no. 4 (2002): 1094–1123; and A. S. Tumanova, *Samoderzhavie i obshchestvennye organizatsii v Rossii. 1905–1917 gody: Monografiia* (Tambov, 2002).

⁹ Bradley, *Voluntary Associations*, 233; Lutz Häfner, introduction to *Grazhdanskaia identichnost' i sfera grazhdanskoi deiatel'nosti v Rossiiskoi imperii. Vtoraia polovina XIX–nachalo XX veka*, ed. Bianka Pietrow-Ennker and Galina Ulianova (Moscow, 2007), 57–58. On the historical debate see Adele Lindenmeyr, "'Primordial and Gelatinous'? Civil Society in Imperial Russia," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 12, no. 3 (Summer 2011): 705–20.

basic features of the Western liberal model: rule of law, civil society, and an uncensored public sphere.”¹⁰

This article approaches the question of the viability of civil society in Russia from a new perspective. By expanding the concept beyond voluntary associations and the elites who established them, it argues that such brick-and-mortar institutions as people's houses were an integral part of a growing public sphere, one that was created not only by educated elites but also by working people.¹¹ In late imperial Russia, repressive state policies placed severe limits on opportunities available to workers for socialization. Autonomous workers' clubs and mutual aid societies like those in Britain or Germany were few and vulnerable to closure by the police. Trade unions and political parties were illegal until 1906 and closely monitored thereafter.¹² The Russian autocracy attempted to win workers' loyalties by creating its own labor unions, but this experiment in “police socialism” ended once and for all in early 1905, when a workers' procession organized by the police-sponsored Assembly of Russian Factory and Mill Workers of St. Petersburg met gunfire from soldiers, igniting Russia's first revolution.¹³ The people's house, then, like the coffeehouse for the eighteenth-century European bourgeoisie, was quite literally a public space that offered working-class Russians a rare legal venue for establishing social networks and ties. Considered from this perspective, people's houses shed light on working-class sociability, aspirations, and values, as well as the possibilities at hand for them to create a civil society of their own.

People's houses were also one of the very few social spaces where members of different social strata interacted in a society that historians generally characterize as deeply fragmented along class and political lines. Their founders sought to provide workers or peasants with an attractive alternative to the dull tearooms and lowbrow theaters that state and church created to entertain the masses, as well as to the underground organizations established by the radical left to politicize them. These reformers' goal of elevating the masses coincided with a strong popular desire for education and leisure: working men and women flocked to people's houses to read newspapers in their tearooms,

¹⁰ Laura Engelstein, *Slavophile Empire: Imperial Russia's Illiberal Path* (Ithaca, NY, 2009), ix.

¹¹ For arguments in favor of expanding the concept of the public sphere beyond the bourgeoisie to include “subaltern counterpublics” and “counter-sites” like people's houses, see Kohn, *Radical Space*, chap. 3, and Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, 1992), 109–42.

¹² Victoria E. Bonnell, *Roots of Rebellion: Workers' Politics and Organizations in St. Petersburg and Moscow, 1900–1914* (Berkeley, 1983).

¹³ Walter Sablinsky, *The Road to Bloody Sunday: Father Gapon and the St. Petersburg Massacre of 1905* (Princeton, NJ, 1976).

borrow books from their libraries, hold meetings, take classes, tour art exhibits, and watch plays and movies. Historians of Russia have long recognized the ethos of service to society that motivated educated Russians of Panina's generation, but less is understood about how they lived that ethos. We also know that Russian workers aspired to self-improvement, but how did they make use of the few opportunities available?¹⁴

Finally, a reconstruction of what occurred within the walls of the Ligovsky People's House in the decade leading up to World War I exposes the texture of cross-class relations and tests the viability of efforts to establish common ground between elites and the masses. To a significant extent the working-class visitors to the LND shared the vision and goals of self-improvement and community advocated by its aristocratic founder and her collaborators from the intelligentsia. Ilya Gerasimov argues similarly in a recent study that the rural agricultural intelligentsia, whom he compares to Rodgers' North Atlantic Progressive reformers, had achieved considerable success by 1917 in "closing the gap" between themselves and the peasants they sought to mobilize in partnerships of cultural modernization.¹⁵ People's houses like Panina's created a public sphere in microcosm that transcended class divisions and modeled a democratic alternative to the country's autocratic political culture. While too few to overcome late imperial Russia's political polarization and social fragmentation, they represented a solution to the "social problem" quite different from the revolutionary approach taken after the Bolshevik seizure of power in 1917.

The best information we have about people's houses owes its existence to Panina and her collaborators at the Ligovsky People's House, who conducted the first and only national survey in 1914.¹⁶ The survey revealed that people's houses first appeared in significant numbers in the 1890s, a decade that saw a general increase in private initiatives to deliver education, charitable assistance, and moral reform to the urban and rural poor. Many of the earliest institutions were created by the Guardianship of Popular Temperance, a state- and church-sponsored organization established under imperial patronage in 1895. Its anodyne people's houses offered workers and peasants tea and alcohol-free popular entertainment as alternatives to the tavern.¹⁷ People's houses continued to multiply in the following decade. Approximately half of

¹⁴ See, for example, Steinberg, *Proletarian Imagination*, and Jeffrey Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read: Literacy and Popular Literature, 1861–1917* (Princeton, NJ, 1985).

¹⁵ Ilya V. Gerasimov, *Modernism and Public Reform in Late Imperial Russia: Rural Professionals and Self-Organization, 1905–1930* (Basingstoke, 2009).

¹⁶ The survey results, along with essays on people's houses, model charters, and building plans, were published in 1918 in *Narodnyi dom* (see note 4).

¹⁷ Herlihy, *The Alcoholic Empire*, chap. 2.

the institutions surveyed were established between 1900 and 1909, and another quarter of them were created in 1910–13.¹⁸

By 1914 slightly more than half were still run by the church-controlled Guardianship, but its dominance over the movement had declined, and reformers dismissed the Guardianship as obsolete and “unquestionably dying out.”¹⁹ The others owed their existence to a diverse array of founders: factory owners, local governments, cooperatives, progressive-minded members of the elite like Panina, educators and other professionals, and a few peasant communes.²⁰ The institution gained considerable momentum from the growing adult education movement, which held its first national congress in 1908.²¹ A further stimulus came from the introduction of limited representative government and voting rights on the national level in 1906, which, in the eyes of reformers, elevated the people's house into an instrument to develop “independent action and citizenship” in the newly enfranchised population.²² Some advocates acknowledged similarities between it and such foreign institutions as London's People's Palace, in order to demonstrate that the Russian institution belonged to an international social movement. But others insisted that the people's house represented an authentically Russian response to needs created by urbanization and economic and political change, not a copy of a Western model.²³

¹⁸ The prewar survey received detailed information for only 113 people's houses. Of those 104 reported the year of their founding; except for one institution founded in 1884, twenty were founded between 1893 and 1899, fifty-four between 1900 and 1909, and twenty-nine between 1910 and 1913; *Narodnyi dom*, 382, 385.

¹⁹ The Guardianship sponsored 124 out of the total of 222 institutions in the survey; *Narodnyi dom*, 378.

²⁰ Institutions founded by private individuals such as Panina were the second most common type after those established by the Guardianship, but those like the LND that remained under the control of their individual founders were rare; most apparently were transferred to the Guardianship, a nongovernment association, or a local government body. According to the survey, twenty-six out of 108 people's houses reported that they were founded by private individuals, but only three out of 113 reported that they were supported by private individuals; *Narodnyi dom*, 385–86.

²¹ Bronson, “Enlightening the Urban Poor,” 94–96.

²² Quotation from *Entsiklopedicheskii slovar' Brokgauz-Efron*, 2nd ed., s.v. “Narodnye doma.”

²³ V. Ia. Danilevskii mentions Walter Besant's People's Palace in London as the first people's house in his *Narodnyi dom i ego obshchestvenno-vospitatel'noe znachenie (doklad v Khar'kovskom Obshchestve Gramotnosti 25 okt. 1898 g.)* (Khar'kov, 1898), 27. N. P. Ballin's *O Narodnykh domakh* (Khar'kov, 1899) includes translations of an article by Toynbee Hall founder Samuel Barnett, a speech by Besant, and a description of Ruskin Hall. V. Charnoluskii and E. Medynskii, however, claim that the Russian institution was not a foreign import but arose out of the educational work of local self-governments, the growing cooperative movement, and the initiative of both upper-class reformers and an emerging worker and peasant intelligentsia; “Razvitie

People's houses could be found in the empire's largest cities, provincial towns, and rural settlements, in both the heartland and the borderlands.²⁴ At one extreme was the temperance Guardianship's massive Nicholas II People's House, which a 1903 guidebook called "one of the most remarkable buildings of Petersburg, both in its beauty and in its size"; a British visitor described it as "a sort of crystal palace."²⁵ Other people's houses were far less grand. Activists in the Siberian town of Barnaul, for example, rebuilt a decrepit prison for their institution.²⁶ Farther east, in tiny Aksha near the Mongolian border, the entire community, from the newly arrived doctor's wife and the veterinarian to local merchants and Cossack cattle farmers, participated in planning and fundraising for the people's house that opened in 1909.²⁷ Some people's houses evolved out of earlier civic initiatives, like the one in the southern city of Kherson, which began as a children's home.²⁸ As these examples suggest, the people's house was an adaptable institution. Some embodied church or employer paternalism in bricks and mortar, but others owed their modest existence to grass-roots initiative, and far less social distance separated their founders from those who used them.

One theme that united all people's houses was their founders' belief in working people's need for better ways to spend their limited free hours. The institution was a favorite of temperance advocates, but alcohol appears to have been of little concern to others, including Panina and collaborators of hers such as V. I. Charnoluskii, an expert on adult education.²⁹ According to him, the civic function of the people's house, not temperance, was paramount:

idei nar. doma, ego sotsial'naia sushchnost', zadachi i organizatsiia," in *Narodnyi dom*, 1–25.

²⁴ Slightly under half of people's houses (forty-eight out of 104) were located in towns with populations between 5,000 and 25,000; almost 30 percent (thirty out of 104) were established in cities with more than 25,000 inhabitants; and the remainder (twenty-six, or 25 percent) served settlements with fewer than 5,000 residents. *Narodnyi dom*, 385.

²⁵ *Putevoditel' po S.-Peterburgu. Obrazovatel'nye ekskursii* (St. Petersburg, 1903), 305–6; British visitor quoted in Herlihy, *The Alcoholic Empire*, 18.

²⁶ *Narodnyi dom*, 389–90.

²⁷ The log building housed a library and small museum and provided a place for readings and amateur theatricals. Anna Bek, *The Life of a Russian Woman Doctor: A Siberian Memoir, 1869–1954*, trans. and ed. Anne D. Rassweiler (Bloomington, IN, 2004), 80–83.

²⁸ *Narodnyi dom*, 385–86.

²⁹ In 1915 the Moscow municipal government planned a citywide network of twenty-four people's houses, whose main goal was to support sobriety; Robert W. Thurston, *Liberal City, Conservative State: Moscow and Russia's Urban Crisis, 1906–1914* (Oxford, 1987), 133. There is no separate chapter or discussion of temperance in *Narodnyi dom*, however, and very little mention of it even in passing.

“every people’s house should, above all,” he advised, “play the role of a local club, whose doors must be wide open to everyone who wishes to spend their leisure time outside their nearly always far from attractive family environment,—in a warm and comfortable place.” There, as “the same free citizen and desired guest as anyone else,” the ordinary working man could meet with others for a “serious business conversation,” a discussion of “burning social questions,” or simply a chat or a game of chess.³⁰

While they did provide opportunities for entertainment and socializing, most institutions placed equal or greater stress on adult education. Small institutions made do with a modest lending library and a magic lantern and slides for Sunday and holiday lectures. Larger people’s houses like the LND offered an ambitious menu of classes and lectures on serious topics delivered by experts on science, history, literature, or current events. Education combined with socializing across religious and ethnic boundaries at the Kiev Literacy Society, originally founded as a Christian organization in 1882. By the early twentieth century its new people’s house attracted thousands of Jewish and non-Jewish visitors alike to its library and literacy schools. Natan M. Meir argues that the people’s house “served as ‘neutral territory’ where Kievans of all faiths and nationalities could and did mingle in the pursuit of knowledge and leisure.”³¹ Advocates underscored how their educational activities contributed to national progress. “How many gifts, talents die in the popular masses,” one speaker lamented to his audience in Khar’kov, “having been lost, ruined, by coarse life [and] the ignorant crowd!” People’s houses provided opportunities that could “open and extract those gifts which, perhaps, will constitute the pride and glory of their fatherland.”³² In this vision people’s houses integrated working-class and peasant visitors into a civic and national community that had the potential to transcend ethnic and class boundaries.

This brief overview of people’s houses in the late imperial period reveals both similarities and differences between the Russian institution and its Western counterparts. They offered the same kinds of educational and recreational activities out of a shared belief in the power of knowledge, culture, and “rational recreation” to change human behavior. Explicitly or implicitly, temperance was a goal behind many institutions. It constituted one tactic in a strategy of encouraging workers to adopt respectable values and habits in order to transform them into knowledgeable, responsible citizens. Reformers in Russia as elsewhere also cherished a hope that such institutions would help bridge social divisions and bring harmony among classes. That goal lay

³⁰ *Narodnyi dom*, 251–52.

³¹ Natan M. Meir, “Jews, Ukrainians, and Russians in Kiev: Intergroup Relations in Late Imperial Associational Life,” *Slavic Review* 65, no. 3 (Fall 2006): 484–85.

³² Danilevskii, *Narodnyi dom*, 26–27; ellipsis in text.

behind a core principle of Anglo-American settlement houses: to provide a space where university students and other members of the elite could live amidst their neighbors in urban slums. But the Russian people's house, like the German *Volksheim* or the Italian *casa del popolo*, did not have residential quarters for middle- or upper-class "settlers."

That difference reflected another, deeper distinction between the Russian people's house and similar Western institutions: the relatively minor role played by religion as either a motive for the reformers or a goal for the institution. German reformers such as Walter Classen in Hamburg viewed the *Volksheim* as one means of countering the abandonment of Christianity by working-class youth.³³ Anglo-American settlement houses had deep roots in their founders' own religious convictions and longing for meaningful spirituality. In her 1892 lecture on the "Subjective Necessity for Social Settlements," for example, Jane Addams traced the motives behind the settlement movement to the search by young people for a way to live Christian values every day; residing amidst the poor in their own neighborhood offered that opportunity.³⁴

By contrast, Christian evangelism is almost completely absent from the goals voiced by Classen's or Addams's Russian counterparts. Even the church-sponsored Guardianship of Popular Temperance placed temperance and entertainment above the goal of returning the masses to Russian Orthodoxy. Unlike orphanages and other Russian charitable institutions, people's houses seldom if ever allocated space to a chapel. Panina, though a practicing Christian herself, did not place any emphasis on religion in her institution. She invited members of the clergy to the dedication of the new building in 1903, where they led prayers and sprinkled the building with holy water; but it is telling that one of them was Father Grigorii S. Petrov, a city parish priest known for his progressive views, who spoke at the ceremony on the importance of education for the masses.³⁵ At other times, attention to religion at the LND and other institutions seems to have been limited to celebrations of Christmas and Easter with magic lantern shows and children's parties.³⁶ The goal of counteracting socialist influence on the working class, so pronounced in the German movement, also played a smaller role in the establishment of people's houses in Russia. The intelligentsia, the class of educated Russians that produced many of the activists in the people's house movement, defined

³³ Lees, *Cities, Sin, and Social Reform*, chap. 7.

³⁴ Reprinted in Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull House: With Autobiographical Notes*, ed. with an introduction by Victoria Bissel Brown (Boston, 1999), chap. 6

³⁵ *Peterburgskii listok*, April 8, 1903, 3.

³⁶ There is no mention of religion, for example, in the compendium of information on people's houses, *Narodnyi dom*, and no space designated for worship in its model plans; see 303–24.

itself by its commitment to progress and its critical attitude toward the state. The frustration that members of the intelligentsia felt with the arbitrary, repressive Russian government tended to encourage their sympathy for leftist critiques of the existing social and political order.

The story of the origins of the Ligovsky People's House illuminates both the distinctive challenges faced by Russian reformers and the goals and approaches they shared with their Western counterparts. The institution traced its beginnings to 1891, when Alexandra Peshekhonova, a middle-aged St. Petersburg schoolteacher, approached a twenty-year-old heiress with a request: would Countess Panina donate funds to support a cafeteria for poor children at her school? Opened later that year, their cafeteria became the nucleus of the future institution. As a native of the city and longtime teacher in an impoverished neighborhood, Peshekhonova possessed an intimate knowledge of the lower-class urban population's needs and aspirations. Her wealthy young partner could provide the means to satisfy them. They had no preconceived plan or design, nor was the project that became the People's House part of an overarching ideology about transforming the political or social order. Whenever Panina recounted the origins of her people's house, she insisted that it grew organically as she and Peshekhonova became acquainted with the families of the children who came to the cafeteria.³⁷ "Life around us," Panina maintained, "knocked loudly and insistently at our doors," and she and her friend responded.

With their parents at work all day, the children had no place to spend time after school other than on the streets "in the cold, mud, and darkness of the early Petersburg winter evenings." So Panina and Peshekhonova decided to keep the cafeteria open after school. When the children's parents and older siblings asked the women for "something to read," or "something to listen to or look at," they organized Sunday readings from literature illustrated with magic lantern slides.³⁸ Regular contact with adult visitors convinced the women of the need for a library, a tearoom, and finally evening classes for adults, the latter beginning in 1900. As the services multiplied and outgrew the rented quarters they occupied, the two women and their small group of teacher-collaborators began to dream of a purpose-built structure to enable them to expand still further. That dream became the Ligovsky People's House.

Like other educated Russians, Panina knew about innovative foreign institutions and visited famous ones on her trips abroad, including the first

³⁷ Panina narrates this history of her people's house in her speech at its tenth anniversary celebration, printed in *Otchet Ligovskogo Narodnogo Doma za pervoe desiatiletie, 1903–1913 gg.* (St. Petersburg, 1914), 13–15, and in her 1948 memoir, "Na Peterburgskoi okraïne," *Novyi zhurnal*, bk. 48 (1957): 163–73.

³⁸ Quotations from Panina, "Na Peterburgskoi okraïne," 166.

settlement house, London's Toynbee Hall, in 1899.³⁹ But she also shared the tendency of many founders of philanthropic enterprises to emphasize the uniqueness of her project rather than its commonalities with other institutions. In her eyes, foreign models were irrelevant given the material and cultural deprivations endured by the people with whom she and Peshekhonova worked. In her surviving correspondence and memoirs she did not mention her visit to Toynbee Hall or other philanthropic institutions she may have seen in Europe. A rare exception is her account of visiting the Urania Society in Berlin in 1911, a museum founded in 1888 to introduce the broad public to the latest scientific discoveries. Commenting on the institution in a letter to a friend, she noted that she "did not discover any Americas" there, since it served a more educated and cultured urban population.⁴⁰ "It is difficult for a present-day inhabitant of any European country whatever, to say nothing of America," she reminisced in the late 1940s, "to imagine just how squalid, grey, and boring life was for the inhabitants of one of Russia's outlying urban districts" at the turn of the twentieth century. Their joyless existence put them "if not in hell, then in purgatory."⁴¹ Like many of her compatriots, Panina believed that the Russian lower classes were considerably more backward than their European counterparts.

She also drew a distinction between her approach to working with the urban poor and the attitudes of fellow Russians. Members of the intelligentsia, she argued, for all their dedication to social betterment, were led by their own values of asceticism and self-sacrifice to concentrate their efforts on instruction and to disdain the equally important need of the lower classes for entertainment and joy. "I believe that the decisive moment and influence in a person's life," Panina insisted, "is not work but the leisure time after work. Only in the hours of leisure is there a place for love and joy, for that which turns a robot into a human being and a human being into an individual." Reformers must address the poor's "hunger and thirst for joy" and their human need for beauty and create a "new symbiosis" of education and entertainment.⁴²

Panina's chance to realize this goal arrived more fully when she inherited her grandmother's fortune in 1899.⁴³ She purchased several properties on

³⁹ London Metropolitan Archives, Records of Toynbee Hall, A/TOY/17/2 Visitors' Book 1885–c. 1920. I am indebted to Dr. Katharine Bradley for this information.

⁴⁰ Letter of June 24, 1911, from Berlin to Lidia Iakovleva, Rossiiskii Institut istorii isskustv (RIII), Kabinet rukopisei, f. 32, op. 1, ed. khr. 121, ll. 21–23.

⁴¹ Panina, "Na Peterburgskoi okraïne," 169–70.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Panina's grandfather, Count Viktor N. Panin, who served as Minister of Justice under Nicholas I and Alexander II, was also one of Russia's greatest landholders. He left the life interest in his fortune to his widow, and when she died in 1899 the Panin fortune passed to her granddaughter, Sofia, who was the only surviving child of their

adjacent streets in the second precinct of the Alexander Nevsky district, located south of central St. Petersburg in the neighborhood where she and Peshekhonova had been working for a decade,⁴⁴ and petitioned the city authorities for permission to build a people's house. Approval came within a few months from both the municipal government and the city commandant.⁴⁵ The decision is remarkable for its speed and for the absence of any expression of official concern about the project's possible dangers, despite the tsarist government's customary suspicion toward philanthropic projects involving urban workers. It took the founders of a people's house in Kiev, for example, fifteen years to plan, obtain approval, and build their institution.⁴⁶ The young countess's petition may have benefited from her influential relatives and connections, as well as from her project's superficial similarity to the state-sanctioned Nicholas II People's House.⁴⁷ Gender may have also been a factor; evidently social work by aristocratic ladies and spinster schoolteachers rang few political alarm bells in the offices of the St. Petersburg security police.

Panina engaged the services of architect Iulii Benois, who belonged to a dynasty of prominent Petersburg architects and artists that included his famous cousin Alexander, the artist and designer for Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. At a time when other Russian architects were experimenting with *style moderne* or historicism, Benois built solid, well-proportioned, modern buildings that would be at home in any European city.⁴⁸ The ensemble of two red

deceased only son. For V. N. Panin's will, Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Drevnikh Aktov, f. 1274, op. 1, d. 1321, ll. 51–56; for Countess N. P. Panina's death in 1899, Rossiiskaia Akademiia Nauk, Institut russkoi literatury (Pushkinskii dom), Kartoteka Modzalevskogo, s.v. "Panina, gr. Nat. Pavl."

⁴⁴ Panina's entry in the 1901 city directory lists her new properties; *Ves' Peterburg na 1901 god* (St. Petersburg, 1900), s.v. "Panina gr. Sof. Vlad."

⁴⁵ Panina first submitted her petition, dated April 24, 1901, to the municipal administration; by June 2 the city commandant (*gradonachal'nik*) had approved it; TsGIA SPb., f. 513, op. 133, d. 97, 1901–1911, ll. 1–5.

⁴⁶ V. F. Aleksandrovskii, *Narodnyi Dom Kievskogo Obshchestva Gramotnosti v g. Kieve. Kratkii ocherk istorii sooruzheniia narodnogo doma* (Kiev, 1902).

⁴⁷ Panina belonged to the Society for the Protection of Women, whose chairwoman, Princess Evgenia Ol'denburgskaia, was related to the Imperial family. Prince Leonid Viazemskii, a member of the State Council, was her cousin's husband. Both are mentioned in the dossier on Panina kept by the security police as her collaborators in the people's house project. The dossier contains no expression of concern about the LND before 1905. Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (GARF), f. 102, op. DOO 1902, d. 992, "O grafine Sof'i Vladimirovny Paninoi [1902–1907]," ll. 4–5, 11–12.

⁴⁸ Benois's portfolio included apartment houses, factory buildings, the headquarters of the Society of Russian Railroads, and buildings for the First Russian Insurance Company and the elite Women's Patriotic Society. B. M. Kirikov, ed., *Arkhitektory-*

brick buildings he designed for the LND combined functionality with restrained ornamentation and harmonious proportions, but they also embodied the founder's objectives. As Margaret Kohn emphasizes in her study of Italian houses of the people, physical space plays an important role in the creation of a public sphere. She applies Foucault's term "heterotopias of resistance" to these institutions, which used space to contest existing hierarchies and construct alternative realities. Similarly, Deborah Weiner argues that Victorian London's settlement houses and people's palaces functioned as a stage "on which social relations were to be recast."⁴⁹ The differing architectural styles of Toynbee Hall, the Maison du Peuple in Brussels, and the *case del popolo* in Bologna helped communicate their meanings and goals to the differing publics they served. The Ligovsky People's House was no different. Unlike Hull House, for example, which adopted a cosy domestic style, there is no mistaking it for a real home. Benois's design rejected both the nostalgia for a preindustrial past conveyed by Toynbee Hall and the ornate grandeur of London's famous People's Palace. Though unremarkable in Russian architectural history, both the exterior and interior of the LND embodied its social and moral mission, colored by Panina's belief in the power of knowledge and art.

Today a short car ride takes one from the Moscow Railroad Station in central St. Petersburg along Ligovsky Prospect to the district where the LND, still in existence as the Railroad Workers' Palace of Culture, opened in 1903. A century ago geographical barriers like the Obvodny Canal accentuated the area's social and cultural isolation from the city's elegant center. One reporter characterized traveling there as a long, perilous journey "along muddy, lonely streets, completely unlike those to whose appearance we are accustomed in our capital," past saloons and crooked wooden houses with "broken windows, dank walls." On the horizon, "tall, eternally smoking factory chimneys pour their smoke into the sky."⁵⁰ The 1900 St. Petersburg census testifies to the area's overwhelmingly working-class character. The great majority of its 43,000 residents were peasants who had been born outside the city, Russian Orthodox and Russian-speaking. As one would expect in a district that

stroiteli Sankt-Peterburga serediny XIX–nachala XX veka (St. Petersburg, 1996), 43–44. On trends in Russian architecture in this period, see E. A. Borisova and T. P. Kazhdan, *Russkaia arkhitektura kontsa XIX–nachala XX veka* (Moscow, 1971), 175–253.

⁴⁹ Kohn, *Radical Space*, 91 and chap. 6; Deborah E. B. Weiner, *Architecture and Social Reform* (Manchester and New York, 1994), 2–3.

⁵⁰ *Peterburgskii listok*, no. 99, April 13, 1903, 3. For a description of this area of the city see D. A. Zasosov and V. I. Pyzin, *Iz zhizni Peterburga 1890–1910-kh godov: Zapiski ochevidtsev* (Leningrad, 1991), 23.

received so many rural migrants, the population was young, and men outnumbered women. But other indicators suggest a certain degree of social stability. The majority of adults were married, and children up to age fifteen comprised more than one-fifth of the population. Literacy was relatively high, reflecting the progress Russia was making in elementary education.⁵¹ The district's employed population consisted of factory and transport workers, petty shopkeepers and traders, tavern keepers and horse-cab drivers.⁵²

Despite the austerity of its exterior and its lack of architectural distinction, the LND amazed contemporaries by its dramatic contrast with the surrounding factories, stables, railroad yards, and slums. Rising amidst this "unattractive environment," one reporter enthused, "the buildings of the People's House appear like some kind of wondrous castle out of a fairy tale, a cathedral of light, a crystal palace."⁵³ The LND also attracted praise for its modern heating, electric lighting, and other technological amenities. The elite newspaper *Birzhevye vedomosti* reported that "no lack of air and light is felt, all hygienic conditions were observed to the last detail, and not one of the latest ways to make the building comfortable was overlooked."⁵⁴ With its spacious yet functional design, industrial construction materials, and up-to-date technology, the new building symbolized Panina's goal of leading Russian workers out of backwardness and ignorance into modernity.⁵⁵

⁵¹ The census tract was the second precinct of Alexander Nevsky district. Of inhabitants age sixteen years or older, 86 percent were born outside the city, while 69 percent of children younger than sixteen were city-born. Seventy-seven percent of the population belonged to the peasant estate. Women comprised 39 percent of the district's population; 60 percent of the total population of the district was age thirty or younger, and more than one-fifth were children and adolescents fifteen or younger. Among inhabitants age six or older, 60 percent were literate in 1900 (69 percent of the men and 44 percent of the women), and in the age group six to twenty years old, over three-quarters of the males and almost two-thirds of the females were literate. *S.-Peterburg po perepisi 15 dekabria 1900 goda*, pt. 1, *Chislennost' i sostav naseleniia po polu, vozrastu, mestu rozhdeniia (v S.-Peterburge ili vne ego), vremeni poseleniia v S.-Peterburge, semeinomu sostoiianiiu, gramotnosti, sosloviuu, veroispovedaniiu i rodnomu iazyku* (St. Petersburg, 1903), 17, 20–23, 31–33, 37, 43–49.

⁵² Among male residents, occupations with more than 1,000 workers included metalworking, woodworking, clothing and footwear manufacture, construction, and transport, the latter with 44 percent of the entire male workforce. Along with its railroad yards, the district was known as the place where many cabmen lived and kept their horses. Textile manufacturing was negligible in the district; the small population of employed women worked in food processing as well as clothing and footwear manufacturing. *S.-Peterburg po perepisi 15 dekabria 1900 goda*, pt. 2, *Raspredelenie naseleniia po zaniatiiam* (St. Petersburg, 1903), 4–5, 8–11, 21–23, 35.

⁵³ *Peterburgskii listok*, no. 99, April 13, 1903, 3.

⁵⁴ V. K., "Novyi narodnyi dom," *Birzhevye vedomosti*, no. 313, November 16, 1902, 2.

⁵⁵ The newly built LND was quickly included in the guidebook of "educational

The interior, like the exterior, was designed to provide visitors from the neighborhood with a spacious environment that sharply contrasted with their extremely crowded living conditions.⁵⁶ This was not a settlement house with residential space for upper-class young men and women; the entire building was devoted to the use of the working-class visitors. The large foyer, broad staircases, and soaring second-floor theater with its elements of art nouveau decoration above the stage added a few aesthetic touches, but most of the building was furnished in a plain, institutional style. Nevertheless it conveyed support for the working-class family by housing facilities for both children and adults under one roof (see fig. 1).⁵⁷

Panina used the interior spaces to develop visitors' pride in their own Russian cultural heritage while increasing their knowledge of the wider world. By presenting Russian and European art and literature side by side, the institution conveyed the message that despite its political and economic backwardness, Russia by virtue of its high culture had earned its place as part of the West. European paintings, portraits of Russian writers, and marble sculptures from Italy adorned the walls and corridors. With its didactic exhibits of paintings and displays on topics such as the Arctic, the oceans, and foreign countries, the LND resembled Toynbee Hall and the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London and Hull House in Chicago, which also sought to introduce the lower classes to art and the world.⁵⁸ But while Panina and her collaborators pursued educational goals, they were equally committed to providing opportunities for leisure. The theater had seats imported from Sweden that could be moved to the sides to turn it into a dance floor, and the LND also began

excursions" in the capital that the municipal government published later in 1903. *Putevoditel' po S.-Peterburgu*, 300–301.

⁵⁶ The majority of the population of the second precinct of Alexander Nevsky district lived in one- or two-story houses, often made of wood, in multiroom apartments housing on average three to four persons per room. *S.-Peterburg po perepisi 15 dekabria 1900 goda*, pt. 3, *Kvartiry i dvorovye mesta* (St. Petersburg, 1905), 144–45, 295.

⁵⁷ The building's floor plans indicate that instructional workshops were located in the basement, along with heating and ventilation facilities and rooms for the yardmen (*dvorniki*) and guard. On the first floor were the children's cafeteria, the tearoom and kitchen, a hall for exhibits and lectures, another classroom, a "smoking room," and a small corner with administrative offices. The children's library and a classroom were located on the mezzanine, along with the theater and backstage areas; the top floor housed the library for adults and two classrooms. Each floor had toilets and lavatories. TsGIA SPb., f. 513, op. 133, d. 97, ll. 75a-ob–75g. Both the exterior and the interior of the building are relatively little changed today.

⁵⁸ Seth Koven, "The Whitechapel Picture Exhibitions and the Politics of Seeing," in *Museum Culture*, ed. D. Sherman and I. Rogoff (Minneapolis, 1994), 22–48.



FIG. 1. —Ligovsky People's House, St. Petersburg (from Rossiiskii Institut Istorii Iskusstv, *Kabinet rukopisei*, f. 32, op. 1, ed. khr. 117/3).

showing movies in 1907.⁵⁹ Both the exterior and the interior of the new LND building enshrined its founders' faith in light, knowledge, and modernity as the means to create a new model of sociability and citizenship.

Ligovsky People's House was expensive to build and run. Panina paid the entire cost of construction, approximately 400,000 rubles (\$200,000 by the exchange rate of the time), and most of its operating costs.⁶⁰ Every year the institution, which received no funds from local government or the state, ran deficits of thousands of rubles. Panina's regular subsidies, which ranged from 2,000 to more than 5,000 rubles a month before World War I, provided most of the operating funds.⁶¹ Panina believed in the importance of charging adult

⁵⁹ Elena Adamenko, "V Ligovskii narodnyi dom mog priiti liuboi izvozchik—za znaniiami," *Chas Pik*, no. 88 (593), May 15, 1996, 14. Monthly films are mentioned in LND annual reports beginning in the 1907/8 season; *Otchet Ligovskogo Narodnogo Doma (5-yi god). S 1-go iunია 1907 g. po 1-oe iunია 1908 g.* (St. Petersburg, 1908), 35–37.

⁶⁰ *Peterburgskii listok*, April 8, 1903, 3.

⁶¹ The institution's operating costs in its first ten years amounted to 427,400 rubles. Deficits totaled almost 180,000 rubles for the first five years of operation, and almost 250,000 rubles for the second five years; *Otchet Ligovskogo Narodnogo Doma za pervoe desiatiletie*, 69. Just over half of the total expenditure went to supporting the building and

visitors small fees for the plays, evening classes, tearoom, and cafeteria, in order to discourage any perception of charity and to encourage a sense of shared ownership.⁶² Most of the other adult activities and all of the children's programs were free.

While Panina was the institution's principal financier, she shared its administration with a small circle of close associates. The main decision-making body was the "Economic Council," whose membership included Panina, a manager hired by her to run the building's daily operations, and her three closest collaborators—the schoolteachers Peshekhonova, Elizaveta Popova (known as "Auntie Liza"), and Nadezhda Ialozo, all of whom had worked with Panina from the 1890s.⁶³ The council met at least monthly during the LND's "season," which ran from fall through spring. Panina attended most of its meetings, but the minutes indicate that it also met and made decisions in her absence. The council discussed the institution's educational and cultural programs only when a serious problem or need arose.⁶⁴ Meetings tended to be dominated instead by mundane concerns about the building's cleanliness and upkeep, or about the conduct of its employees, who were expected to "treat the public and children courteously and attentively" and were fined or dismissed for drunkenness, absenteeism, or rudeness toward the visitors.⁶⁵ Responsibility for running the various activities, such as the theater, children's programs, and adult evening classes, was entrusted to the LND's autonomous depart-

paying its employees. The other half went to the activities, of which the theater and other entertainments were the most costly; more than a third of the operating costs went to them, followed by the vocational classes, which took another quarter of the funds. Panina's allocations fluctuated from month to month; as a rule, she seemed to provide whatever was necessary to cover the shortfall between monthly income and the costs of running the institution and made additional contributions whenever the building needed major repairs or improvements. TsGIA SPb., f. 219, op. 1, d. 6, Otchet LND nach. Dek. 1909 okonch. 1917 g. This file contains monthly and annual financial reports from December 1909 to the end of 1916.

⁶² Lydia Wassiltschikow, *Verschwundenes Russland* (Vienna-Munich-Zurich-New York, 1980), 36–37.

⁶³ TsGIA SPb., f. 219, op. 1, d. 14, ll. 1, 12–12ob; d. 3, l. 6ob. The two remaining council members were Ivan Smetannikov (or sometimes Smetannik), the director of the boys' Instructional Workshop, and Maria Zotova, who was responsible for the kitchen, cafeterias, and housekeeping. The manager's responsibilities included supplies, building maintenance and repairs, the paid staff (a clerk, three to four yardmen, a porter [*shveitsar*], a guard, and stokers for the furnace), disbursement of funds for the various operations and departments, and all official business with the police and municipal authorities, including obtaining the necessary permission for all events. TsGIA SPb., f. 219, op. 1, d. 3, ll. 5–6.

⁶⁴ Based on the minutes of council meetings from June 30, 1912 to June 18, 1913, during which year there were thirty-three meetings; TsGIA SPb., f. 219, op. 1, d. 16.

⁶⁵ TsGIA SPb., f. 219, op. 1, d. 3, ll. 8–8ob.

ments, which multiplied as the institution expanded from five core operations in 1903 to thirteen a decade later.⁶⁶ A paid or volunteer administrator submitted periodic reports to the council, but decisions within departments were made at meetings of their staff, called “coworkers” (*sotrudniki*). Thus in contrast to the authoritarian, hierarchical political culture of late imperial Russia, the Ligovsky People’s House was administered according to a decentralized system of governance based on principles of rationality, accountability, and participation.

At the same time, the institution was notably self-contained. Many, if not all, privately founded charitable institutions in Russia had some kind of board, even those like the People’s House that were established by one donor. At the People’s House, leadership was concentrated in a small sisterhood consisting of Panina and a handful of her oldest and closest collaborators. They attracted a dedicated corps of coworkers, most of whom, at least in the early years, were volunteers.⁶⁷ Many devoted years to the LND. In 1913, for example, thirty-two of the coworkers had been at the People’s House more than five years, and six of them had worked there for more than ten.⁶⁸ The predominance of women follows the pattern familiar to historians of similar Western institutions. Although the paid manager was always a man, five of the seven members of the LND’s Economic Council were women, as were roughly two-thirds of its coworkers, including virtually all of the volunteers.⁶⁹ At the

⁶⁶ *Otchet Ligovskogo Narodnogo Doma (2-oi god). S 1-go liuniii 1904 g. po 1-oe liunia 1905 g.* (St. Petersburg, 1906), 6; *Otchet Ligovskogo Narodnogo Doma za pervoe desiatiletie*, 68. The thirteen departments operated the adult evening classes, the library, the lectures, the astronomical observatory, the Sunday and holiday readings, the theater, a tearoom, a cafeteria, the vocational courses, after-school and holiday programs for children, a children’s cafeteria, a savings bank, and a legal aid office.

⁶⁷ In 1904/5, for example, sixty out of seventy-five were volunteers, and in 1908/9, when the number of coworkers rose to a high of 101, the majority were still volunteers (only thirty-eight of them were paid). *Otchet Ligovskogo Narodnogo Doma (2-oi god)*, 6; *Otchet Ligovskogo Narodnogo Doma (6-oi god). S 1-go liuniii 1908 g. po 1-oe liunia 1909 g.* (St. Petersburg, 1909), 3. The following year, for reasons that are unclear, the number of all coworkers dropped to sixty-five, and volunteers to twenty-three; those numbers and proportions were virtually unchanged in 1913. *Otchet Ligovskogo Narodnogo Doma (7-oi god). S 1-go liuniii 1909 g. po 1-oe liunia 1910 g.* (St. Petersburg, 1910), 3. In 1913 there were sixty-four coworkers, twenty-two of whom were volunteers; *Otchet Ligovskogo Narodnogo Doma za pervoe desiatiletie*, 69.

⁶⁸ *Otchet Ligovskogo Narodnogo Doma za pervoe desiatiletie*, 69.

⁶⁹ Of the sixty-four coworkers in 1913, forty were women and twenty-four were men; of the twenty-two who were volunteers, all but two were women. Most of the positions that women occupied at the LND were unpaid, while most of the positions men held were paid. *Ibid.*, 69. Women comprised three-fifths of all residents in American settlement houses between 1889 and 1914, and 70 percent of the leadership of the movement to establish people’s houses in the Netherlands. Eleanor J. Stebner, *The Women of Hull House: A Study in Spirituality, Vocation, and Friendship* (Albany,

heart of the institution was the cohort of women, mostly unmarried teachers, with whom Panina had worked since the 1890s. Although the LND was not a residence, like Hull House it became a space where single women forged relationships and created meaning for their lives.⁷⁰ One volunteer wrote to Panina in 1913 of her gratitude “for these ten years with you, endlessly grateful for that happiness that you gave me and for the existence of the House, and the opportunity to work there, and your personal relations with me.”⁷¹ For some, the institution became a surrogate family; Peshekhonova, Popova, and Ialozo, for example, lived together in a nearby apartment from at least 1908 into the 1930s.⁷² In a society that was still highly patriarchal, the LND was an autonomous, female-dominated realm co-ruled by Peshekhonova, a kindly spinster schoolteacher, and Panina, whom her closest collaborators sometimes compared to a benevolent sorceress with seemingly unlimited powers to make wishes come true.⁷³

Of course, considerable social distance separated the LND’s founder from her coworkers, and both of them from the working-class visitors—a class divide that was never completely bridged. While many called Panina by her name and patronymic, the respectful form of address used across classes, others referred to her as “*Vashe siiatel’stvo*” (Your Highness), especially the working-class visitors. Within the walls of the People’s House, centuries-old habits of social deference coexisted with its more egalitarian ethos. Russians continued to be legally defined by their social estate for decades after the abolition of serfdom in 1861. To be sure, advances in education and economic modernization were eroding the once rigid class structure, creating the kinds

NY, 1997), 17; Nijenhuis, *Hundred Years of Settlements*, 121–39. See also Katharine Bentley Beaman, *Women and the Settlement Movement* (London, 1996), and Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women, 1850–1920* (Chicago, 1985), esp. chap. 6.

⁷⁰ See Stebner, *The Women of Hull House*; and Kathryn Kish Sklar, “Hull House in the 1890s: A Community of Women Reformers,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 10, no. 4 (Summer 1985): 658–77.

⁷¹ RIII, f. 32, op. 1, ed. khr. 123, l. 7.

⁷² *Ves’ Peterburg na 1909 god. Adresnaia i spravochnaia kniga S-Peterburga* (St. Petersburg, 1908); *Ves’ Peterburg na 1915 god. Adresnaia i spravochnaia kniga S-Peterburga* (St. Petersburg, 1914); letters to Panina from Peshekhonova, Popova, and Ialozo from the 1920s and 1930s in Columbia University, Bakhmetev Russian Archive (BAR), s.v. Panina Collection, box 7, Arranged Correspondence, folder Peshekhonova.

⁷³ Living in Switzerland, Panina received an unsigned letter dated April 15, 1923, in honor of the LND’s twentieth anniversary. “Dedicated to a dear friend,” it is an allegory titled “A Fairy Tale,” which depicts Panina as a bright star sent to earth to dispel darkness, bring love, and lead people to the light. BAR Panina, box 14, folder Ligoskii Narodnyi Dom, Soviet Period.

of new social identities and opportunities for cross-class interactions found at places such as people's houses. Primarily peasant in origin, the LND's visitors had left their villages to find a living in urban occupations; they flocked to the people's house to learn urban ways. Yet as many of them were the children or grandchildren of serfs, they understandably reverted to customs of deference when interacting with a countess. The social origins of coworkers were significantly more diverse, reflecting the capital's social and economic complexity. Some, like Peshekhonova, were the educated offspring of urban artisans, while others came from families of journalists, actors, or similar professions. Collectively they belonged to the lower ranks of the capital's intelligentsia, a mixed middle stratum of teachers, artists, professionals, and social activists. None was Panina's social peer. While probably less awed than the working-class visitors by her august lineage and wealth, they hardly would presume to consider themselves her equal.

Panina took steps to diminish the distance that separated her from coworkers and visitors. She regularly spent days and evenings at the LND, participating in its day-to-day activities and giving occasional lectures.⁷⁴ She mingled with visitors and administered surveys in order to learn about their lives and interests. Writing after Panina died in New York in 1956, Aleksei Kapralov, a former student in the evening courses from 1911 to 1914 who became an agronomy professor, published a tribute in an émigré newspaper. "I often happened to meet with Sofia Vladimirovna," he recalled, "either at the tea table, or in the auditorium, or at the library, and every time S. V. produced an unforgettable impression on me." Despite their social differences, Kapralov claimed, she approached the working-class visitors to the LND simply and easily. Inverting Panina's noble rank, he called her "a true popular democrat" who "ennobled" everyone she met.⁷⁵ Yet even her dear friend Peshekhonova recalled how "during the first years of our acquaintance you stood so far from all of us: you were the good sorceress who appeared amongst us for the incarnation of our daring dreams."⁷⁶ While distancing her from those she worked with, Panina's aristocratic status added to the charismatic quality of her leadership and even strengthened visitors' and coworkers' belief in the LND's mission. Defying accusations from her relatives of socialist leanings and class apostasy, a countess had founded and sustained a socially progressive, inclusive institution: to members of the liberal intelligentsia, did that not

⁷⁴ In 1913 and 1914, for example, the city commandant approved lectures by Panina on Leo Tolstoy and local government; TsGIA SPb., f. 569, op. 13, d. 1059g, ll. 57–61, 109–10.

⁷⁵ Aleksei Kapralov, "Ligovskii Narodnyi Dom: Vospominaniia blagodarnogo vospitanika," *Russkaia mysl'*, no. 929, July 24, 1956, 7.

⁷⁶ Letter from Peshekhonova to Panina dated November 17, 1923, in BAR Panina, box 7, Arranged Correspondence, folder Peshekhonova.

symbolize the country's potential to surmount its class hierarchies and build a more inclusive civil order?⁷⁷

The means that Panina, Peshekhonova, and their coworkers employed to connect with the workers of the Alexander Nevsky district were education and exposure to elite culture—a single, unifying culture whose superiority and transformative power they never questioned. In their eyes the transmission of knowledge and culture was a one-way street; but they believed that their clients shared their values and yearned for their enlightenment. Visitors' responses indicate that to a considerable extent Panina and her coworkers were right. Although some neighbors may have resented the incursion that the institution represented, to others its founders were well known, having already worked with local children and adults for more than a decade before the new building opened in 1903. They flocked in large numbers to the LND's offerings of "good" literature, theater, and art and the opportunities it offered for self-improvement. At the same time, a number of visitors used the building as a place to pursue their own goals and create their own version of sociability and community.

The LND operated an array of activities for children and adolescents. In addition to the original cafeteria and a children's library, it provided day care, an after-school program, and special entertainments. On Sundays and holidays 400 to 500 children crowded into the building for magic shows, parties, readings, or presentations on literature, science, and history with slides and *tableaux vivants*.⁷⁸ The LND also ran two departments for adolescents who had finished primary school but were too young to enter work or an apprenticeship. Although instruction was highly gendered, the classes for both girls and boys sought to develop their intellectual independence. The girls in the "Handicraft Classes" received lessons in sewing, Russian, arithmetic, drawing, and "*mirovedenie*"—knowledge of the wider world. The classes sought "to arouse in the [girls] an interest in life around them, to teach them to relate thoughtfully to the phenomena of life, to develop and support habits of rational reading, in order to send them into life with at least some consciousness of personal responsibility and a feeling of duty."⁷⁹ The boys who attended the LND's "Instructional Workshop" were trained to become "knowledgeable and intelligent" factory workers. The curriculum included drafting, drawing, and geometry as well as history, geography, and *mirovedenie*; in the third year, boys learned physics and mechanics as well as receiving instruction from master craftsmen. The boys were also taken on cultural excursions, and

⁷⁷ A 1913 letter to Panina from a former schoolmate described hearing accusations that Panina was a "revolutionary"; "may God grant," she wrote, "that there be more of 'those' revolutionaries in Russia." RIII, f. 32, op. 1, ed. khr. 123, ll. 11–12.

⁷⁸ *Ochet Ligovskogo Narodnogo Doma za pervoe desiatiletie*, 37–38.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 37.

they organized their own literary and musical presentations. Over the course of its first ten years the courses graduated eighty-five carpenters and metal-fitters. Although one graduate “sank to the bottom and became a vagrant,” the great majority found skilled, well-paying work at Petersburg factories such as Westinghouse and Putilov or with the railroad. Graduates even included three brothers who immigrated to Philadelphia, where they found factory work, and another young man who entered St. Petersburg University.⁸⁰

Most adults came to the LND seeking relaxation and entertainment. Open every day, the cafeteria and tearoom received tens of thousands of visits a year.⁸¹ On Sundays and holidays, one admiring reporter recounted, the tearoom filled with workers and their families, who came “to ‘drink tea with the family,’ take a rest from their cramped, stuffy corners, look at the pictures, read a newspaper, listen to a reading with slides.”⁸² The Sunday and holiday readings filled the LND’s theater with an average of several hundred attendees.⁸³ Organizers struggled to find useful and uplifting subjects that would still keep the interest of the large, diverse, and “little developed” audience. Although the great majority featured readings from Russian and foreign literature, topics also included geography, historical events, scientific subjects like the undersea world and “how people sail through the air,” and, very rarely, Christian religion.⁸⁴ A survey conducted in 1913 revealed that female attendees preferred literary topics, while male respondents asked for discussions of questions relating to “life”: on alcohol and sobriety, on relations between spouses when wives no longer “want to be subordinated to the husband,” and on how the working class, “which forges all wealth but goes about cold and hungry,” lived in other countries.⁸⁵

⁸⁰ “Otchet Ligovskoi uchebnoi masterskoi s 20-go avgusta 1903 g. po 1-oe iunia 1913 g. (10-ti letnii),” TsGIA SPb., f. 219, op. 1, ed. khr. 35. Petersburg’s metallurgical and machine-building plants could provide decent wages to workers with good skills; Gerald D. Surh, *1905 in St. Petersburg: Labor, Society, and Revolution* (Stanford, CA, 1989), 23–25.

⁸¹ *Otchet Ligovskogo Narodnogo Doma za pervoe desiatiletie*, 97 ff. (tables).

⁸² E. S., “Ligovskii narodnyi dom gr. S. V. Paninoi,” *Teatral’naia Rossiia*, 1905, no. 10.

⁸³ *Otchet Ligovskogo Narodnogo Doma za pervoe desiatiletie*, 68. In 1913, for example, the Sunday readings attracted a total of more than 26,000 visits, an average of more than 800 per event; the LND’s theater could hold 700 for plays and more than 900 for other events.

⁸⁴ The complete list is in *ibid.*, 79–86.

⁸⁵ The survey revealed a predominantly young, working-class audience (73 percent younger than twenty-five), with a large minority of young women; a third had attended the readings for more than five years. *Ibid.*, 30–33. Quotations from survey responses are on 32–33, and the original survey with its twelve questions is in TsGIA SPb., f. 219, op. 1, ed. khr. 13, l. 3ob.

The adult library, which opened in 1898 with 446 books, grew to more than 7,400 volumes and served more than 3,000 readers by 1913.⁸⁶ A questionnaire revealed that readers were overwhelmingly young and working class. With women's literacy rates lower than men's in late imperial Russia, it is not surprising that only about one-quarter of adult readers were women, although almost half of readers at the children's library were girls.⁸⁷ Like other social reformers in Russia and the West, the library staff sought to lead working-class readers away from popular melodramas like *The Bandit Churkin* toward "good" literature. Despite patrons' requests, the library staff refused to carry Anastasia Verbitskaia's racy *The Keys to Happiness* or other new fiction they considered cynical or vulgar. In other respects, however, the library attempted to satisfy its readers' interests. Advanced readers took advantage of its collection of science, history, and works of Russian and world literature, both classic and modern. During 1905–6 librarians scrambled to meet the explosion of demand for works on political and social questions, although they found that interest quickly receded. In the postrevolutionary period the library answered a growing number of requests from a minority of "serious" readers for works of psychology and philosophy.⁸⁸

The LND also tried to develop artistic sensibilities by, in Panina's words, "not only enriching our visitor and listener with exact, instructive, and useful knowledge but also introducing him to that bright joy of life that we call art," in order to "catch dark and blind human souls in nets of beauty."⁸⁹ Using her acquaintance with Ilya Repin and other artists, she and coworker Lidia Iakovleva organized summer art exhibits in 1904 and 1907, but the artwork made a confused impression on the few who attended.⁹⁰ An exhibit on electricity in May–June 1911, in contrast, attracted two hundred to four hundred visitors a day.⁹¹ The experience with music was more gratifying. Visitors formed their own choir and balalaika orchestra. Operas and concerts

⁸⁶ *Otchet Ligovskogo Narodnogo Doma za pervoe desiatiletie*, 25, 68.

⁸⁷ Fifty-nine percent of respondents were between fifteen and twenty years old. *Otchet Ligovskogo Narodnogo Doma (5-yi god). S 1-go Iiunია 1907 g. po 1-oe Iiunia 1908 g.* (St. Petersburg, 1908), 24–25.

⁸⁸ *Otchet Ligovskogo Narodnogo Doma za pervoe desiatiletie*, 25–26. A. V. Peshekhonova, "Iz zhizni odnoi besplatnoi biblioteki," *Bibliotekar'* 1913, bk. 3, 173–82. On the campaign for "good" literature in Germany, see Lynn Abrams, *Workers' Culture in Imperial Germany: Leisure and Recreation in the Rhineland and Westphalia* (London, 1992), 145–53.

⁸⁹ Grafina S. V. Panina, "Iskusstvo v narodnoi auditorii," *Trudy Vserossiiskogo s"ezda khudozhnikov: dekabr' 1911–ianvar' 1912* (SPb., 1912), vol. 5, 2.

⁹⁰ *Otchet Ligovskogo Narodnogo Doma (5-yi god)*, 27–28; Panina's letters to Lidia Iakovleva, RIII, f. 32, op. 1, ed. khr. 121.

⁹¹ *Otchet Ligovskogo Narodnogo Doma (8-oi god). S 1-go Iiunია 1910 g. po 1-oe Iiunia 1911 g.* (St. Petersburg, 1911), 41.

of European and Russian classical compositions were performed.⁹² Perhaps to the chagrin of the LND's culture-bearers, however, the most popular entertainment proved to be movies. In 1907–8, the year movies were introduced at the LND, the average attendance at the monthly shows exceeded even the attendance at the popular Sunday readings.⁹³

The LND's own theater was run by two prominent figures in theater history whose careers continued into the Soviet era—director Pavel Gaideburov and his wife, actress Nadezhda Skarskaia. Both came from the intelligentsia, she from the eminent musical and theatrical Komissarzhevskii family and he from the family of a writer for liberal journals in the 1860s–80s.⁹⁴ The repertoire was forged, in Gaideburov's words, “between the hammer of censorship pressures and the anvil of our artistic intentions.”⁹⁵ When the theater first opened in 1903 it was classified by the government as a “popular” theater and was subject to a special censor. The government's approved list of plays for such theaters prohibited them from performing many Russian classics and favored melodrama and farce. After a few years Gaideburov's theater managed to be reclassified as a “generally accessible” theater, which transferred it to a different censorship authority and gained it access to a much larger list of plays.⁹⁶ When selecting plays, Gaideburov and Panina not only had to follow the censor's dictates but also imposed criteria of their own: plays should have literary and artistic merit, clarity and universality in their characters' psychology, and no “pessimistic world view.”⁹⁷ Consequently the theater avoided popular farces and burlesques in favor of classic works by Alexander Pushkin, Alexander Ostrovskii, and Nikolai Gogol, whose *The Inspector General* was performed every year to large and appreciative audiences, and new plays by

⁹² *Otchet Ligovskogo Narodnogo Doma (5-yi god)*, 38–40; *Otchet Ligovskogo Narodnogo Doma (8-oi god)*, 40–41.

⁹³ Average attendance at the movies in 1907/8 was 978, while attendance at the Sunday and holiday readings fell that year to an average of 562. In 1910/11 the LND showed twelve movies, with an average attendance of 801. *Otchet Ligovskogo Narodnogo Doma (5-yi god)*, 35–37; *Otchet Ligovskogo Narodnogo Doma (8-oi god)*, 41. Coworkers' disapproval of films is suggested by the absence of mention of them in the tenth anniversary report.

⁹⁴ Sim. Dreiden, “Stranitsy bol'shoi zhizni,” in N. F. Skarskaia and P. P. Gaideburov, *Na stsene i v zhizni. Stranitsy avtobiografii* (Moscow, 1959), 8–9. Gaideburov's recollections of his prerevolutionary career and the LND are in P. P. Gaideburov, *Pavel Pavlovich Gaideburov: Literaturnoe nasledie. Vospominaniia, Stat'i, Rezhisserskie eksplikatsii, Vystupleniia* (Moscow, 1977), 187–204. On Gaideburov and the LND theater, see James Van Geldern, *Bolshevik Festivals, 1917–1920* (Berkeley, 1993), 119–21.

⁹⁵ *Otchet Ligovskogo Narodnogo Doma za pervoe desiatiletie*, 42.

⁹⁶ On “generally accessible” theaters see Swift, *Popular Theater and Society in Tsarist Russia*, 10–11.

⁹⁷ *Otchet Ligovskogo Narodnogo Doma (5-yi god)*, 31.

Anton Chekhov, Maxim Gorky, and Leo Tolstoy. Sophocles and Shakespeare, Byron and Molière, Shaw and Ibsen were also performed on the LND stage. In its first five years the theater put on 108 performances of eighty-six different plays, with an average of 520 spectators.⁹⁸

Given this repertoire, Gaideburov's company initially struggled to find ways to reach the working-class audience. His description of an early production of Ostrovskii's play *Vasilisa Melent'eva* illustrates the obstacles to finding a "common artistic language." The public's enthusiastic yet crude response to the play dismayed the director and his company. "Amidst the applause and deafening whistles (the highest degree of approval)," Gaideburov recalled, "bottles of vodka, which the provident spectators evidently brought with them in their pockets, fell at the feet of the actors. In the scenes where Vasilisa flirts with [Ivan the] Terrible, or where he admires her beauty, the actors had to listen to cynical comments and intimate advice from the experienced Don Juans from the Obvodny Canal."⁹⁹ A critic from an avant-garde literary journal was similarly condescending, characterizing the LND's audience as a gathering of tipsy artisans, "supercilious dandies wearing pink neckties" who worked as factory clerks, and "giggling maidens" wearing new galoshes ("the height of chic").¹⁰⁰ Seeking ways to acculturate such spectators, the theater company conducted surveys to learn about the audience's tastes, while never wavering from its insistence on producing ancient and modern classics.

Another activity that brought the people's house into continual contact with the authorities was its public lectures. Advance permission from the city commandant was required for each lecture, and police attended to make sure that the approved speaker adhered to the approved topic. The decisions of the authorities were unpredictable. In 1910/11, for example, they prohibited lectures titled "What Is Justice" and "The Condition of Women from Ancient Times" but allowed one on the history of property and another on the development of the family.¹⁰¹ In September of 1913 the LND planned a series of lectures on economic topics, beginning with a talk on "Labor and Cooperation." The city commandant granted permission for that lecture and others on "American Multi-millionaires," "Trade," and "Money" but rejected "General and Historical Definitions of Capital" as "inappropriate" for a working-

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 32–33. For the list of plays performed during the first ten years, see *Otchet Ligoivskogo Narodnogo Doma za pervoe desiatiletie*, 90–93.

⁹⁹ *Otchet Ligoivskogo Narodnogo Doma za pervoe desiatiletie*, 46.

¹⁰⁰ Sergei Auslender, "Narodnyi Dom grafini Paninnoi," *Apollon* no. 4 (January 1910): 77.

¹⁰¹ *Otchet Ligoivskogo Narodnogo Doma. (8-oi god)*, 14–16. There were thirty-seven lectures that year, with an average of 104 attendees.

class district.¹⁰² Noting a decline in the quality and quantity of the lectures, the 1907/08 report explicitly blamed the authorities, whose “constant refusal to permit any lectures whatsoever on social questions” disrupted plans and demoralized both organizers and audience.¹⁰³ But the government’s apprehension is hardly surprising. The lectures attracted a serious audience composed primarily of young working men, most of whom attended regularly.¹⁰⁴ With their focus on science, history, and, when permitted, economics and political questions, the lectures encouraged attendees to think broadly and critically about contemporary issues.¹⁰⁵

Young working adults were also the main constituency for the LND’s evening courses. The demands of working-class life presented enormous obstacles to the men and especially women who enrolled. “Truly,” the 1907/08 report commented, “if you take into consideration all of the difficulties that working people must overcome in order to visit the classes, then you must be amazed at the energy and love of knowledge that give them strength not to leave their studies.”¹⁰⁶ The conscientious pedagogues who ran the courses struggled to develop an educationally coherent program that took into account students’ exhaustion after a long day’s work along with their varying abilities and aspirations.¹⁰⁷ The courses offered a general education program with thirteen subjects and several different levels, with a separate division for illiterate women workers. Classes were held on weeknights and Sundays during the day, and while male students were charged a modest fee of thirty kopecks per month, female students in the separate literacy classes for women

¹⁰² TsGIA SPb., f. 569, op. 13, d. 1059g, ll. 1–20.

¹⁰³ *Otchet Ligovskogo Narodnogo Doma. (5-yi god)*, 13–14.

¹⁰⁴ *Otchet Ligovskogo Narodnogo Doma. (8-oi god)*, 15. Later surveys of the audience confirmed that the majority were working men under thirty, although the number of women attending was growing; 87 percent said they came to every or almost every lecture; *Otchet Ligovskogo Narodnogo Doma za pervoe desiatiletie*, 22–23.

¹⁰⁵ In its first five years the LND presented 219 lectures, 163 of which were on scientific topics, and the remainder on history, literature, economics, and politics. Among the lectures given on bacteria, cholera, and the solar system were ones on “Illness, Mortality and Accidents among Workers,” trade unions, illegitimate children, and “On Freedom.” A list of the topics of all lectures for the LND’s first ten years is in *Otchet Ligovskogo Narodnogo Doma za pervoe desiatiletie*, 75–79.

¹⁰⁶ *Otchet Ligovskogo Narodnogo Doma. (5-yi god)*, 8.

¹⁰⁷ The courses tried to serve everyone from illiterates to elementary school graduates, in a structured progression that began with basic literacy and culminated with science, history, and literature. Anyone, they hoped, who proceeded through the program “can easily continue his education independently, or enter any school appropriate to his knowledge.” *Ligovskie vechernie klassy dlia vzroslykh [Prospekt]* (St. Petersburg., 1909), 2.

attended for free.¹⁰⁸ Attrition was high: of the 1,070 adults who enrolled in the classes in the fall of 1910, for example, only 243 remained by May.¹⁰⁹ Those who managed to stay viewed the courses with gratitude and affection. V. Anisimov, a worker who was one of the first to attend the courses when they opened in 1900, recalled in 1913 how they united teachers and students as “older and younger comrades . . . [into] a single family.”¹¹⁰

The evening courses for adults also produced what Panina and her coworkers regarded as one of the LND’s greatest successes—its own working-class intelligentsia.¹¹¹ In early 1908, visitors to the evening courses, probably from the contingent of literate, skilled workingmen who attended the more advanced courses, created a “student literary circle.” The circle’s motives and aims mirrored the LND’s: concern over the absence of “rational, healthy entertainment” for workers and a strong commitment to literature and self-education, including learning how to speak in public. During the summer of 1908 it organized six Sunday public readings before a “full house,” with recitations of poems and stories by canonical writers such as Pushkin, Nikolai Nekrasov, and Mikhail Lermontov, musical pieces for piano and mandolin, and, on some evenings, dances that went until midnight. A more formal literary evening in September included presentations by circle members on Tolstoy and Ivan Turgenev.¹¹² The circle produced an anthology of members’ literary works under the evocative title *Awakening Thought*, and it organized excursions and educational tours. Students from the evening courses also formed a “Council of Elders” to advise teachers on how to improve instruction and lower the attrition rate, and they collaborated with the theater company to help it better understand the audience.¹¹³

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 2–3.

¹⁰⁹ *Otchet Ligovskogo Narodnogo Doma. (8-oi god)*, 7–8. Established in 1900 with fifty-seven students and four teachers, by 1903 the evening classes had already attracted 150 students with seven teachers. They reached a peak of 1,156 students in 1909/10, dropped to 1,070 the following year, but plunged to 481 in 1911/12, due in part to a decrease in teachers. *Otchet Ligovskogo Narodnogo Doma za pervoe desiatiletie*, 16–17, 68.

¹¹⁰ V. Anisimov, “Kratkii ocherk Ligovskogo Narodnogo Doma,” *Ekho otvetnoe: Literaturnyi sbornik, posviashchennyi 10-letiiu L[igovskikh] V[echernikh] K[lassov]* (St. Petersburg, 1913), 5.

¹¹¹ The report for 1907–8 praised “the beginning of the formation of a kernel of civic consciousness among students in the evening classes. This is especially valuable and positive data, giving a token of certainty that the House’s work is going along the right path.” *Otchet Ligovskogo Narodnogo Doma. (5-yi god)*, 5.

¹¹² TsGIA SPb., f. 219, op. 1, d. 5, “Otchet [uchenicheskogo literaturnogo kruzhka] s 15 apr. 1908 goda po 25 apr. 1909 goda.”

¹¹³ *Otchet Ligovskogo Narodnogo Doma. (8-oi god)*, 7–8, 11; *Otchet Ligovskogo Narodnogo Doma za pervoe desiatiletie*, 17–18; A. A. Briantsev, *Vospominaniia, Stat’i, vystupleniia, dnevniki, pis’ma* (Moscow, 1979), 57; V. Torskii, “Samodeiatel’nost’

The workers' literary circle took an active role in planning and staging the celebration of the LND's tenth anniversary in 1913. Aleksei Mashirov-Samobytnik, a worker-poet whose verse achieved minor renown in the 1920s (his nom de plume "Samobytnik" means "the original" or the "self-made one"), gave a speech comparing the LND to a "bright" ship that brought joy to the "forgotten" inhabitants of "gloomy, wild" shores.¹¹⁴ Similar themes appeared in other works visitors wrote for the occasion, including a "Jubilee Cantata." It uses the familiar tropes of darkness and light, misery, struggle, and determination that Mark Steinberg has analyzed in proletarian poetry from this period:¹¹⁵

Greetings to you, People's House! . . .
From the surrounding forges we, labor's children,
Forgotten in eternal struggle,
Assembled here for your bright holiday,
And put together a song to you:
Hail, hail, People's House!
You were born in the fight with darkness,
And bestowed by a noble hand. . . .
You generate strength and faith
With your true light.

The literary circle published the cantata along with their poems and essays about the LND in a special "literary anthology" titled *Answering Echo*.¹¹⁶

Panina and her coworkers greeted the initiatives of the LND's worker intelligentsia as an affirmation of the LND's goals and the unity that could be forged between classes.¹¹⁷ They interpreted them as evidence that the people's house could overcome the political polarization that characterized late imperial Russia. But undertones in the literary productions of these worker-visitors suggest limits to their gratitude and a political subtext in their encomiums. One adult student, for example, writing to Panina in 1913, testified to the political enlightenment that could result from attending lectures and classes at the LND: "Here I learned where our world came from[.] Here for the first time

uchashchikhsia v Ligoovskikh Vechernikh klassakh," *Ekho otvetnoe*, 11–15; "K kharakteristike deiatel'nosti Ligoovskogo Narodnogo Doma," *Ekho otvetnoe*, 39–42.

¹¹⁴ *Otchet Ligoovskogo Narodnogo Doma za pervoe desiatiletie*, 62–64; for Mashirov-Samobytnik's biography see Steinberg, *Proletarian Imagination*, 304–5.

¹¹⁵ "Kantata. V chest' desiatiletia Ligoovskogo Narodnogo Doma," *Ekho otvetnoe*, 8–9; see Steinberg, *Proletarian Imagination*, chap. 2.

¹¹⁶ *Ekho otvetnoe: Literaturnyi sbornik, posviashchennyi 10-letiiu L[igoovskikh] V[echernikh] K[lassov]* (St. Petersburg, 1913).

¹¹⁷ See, for example, Panina's speech at the tenth anniversary celebration as printed in the jubilee report, *Otchet Ligoovskogo Narodnogo Doma za pervoe desiatiletie*, 21.

I heard about martyrs for science. Here I learned how we became slaves of the landlord, who considered their slaves not people but working cattle.”¹¹⁸ It is striking that Panina is mentioned by name only once in the jubilee anthology *Answering Echo*. In his essay on the history of the People’s House, evening student Anisimov promised that “When the bright day comes to Rus’, the free citizens of a free Rus’ will say an eternal grateful thank you to all those toilers who, in the hard times, carried with such honor their exploit [*podvig*]*—*the work of enlightening their unfortunate brothers.” But once that “bright day” arrived, he hinted, benefactors like Panina would no longer be needed.¹¹⁹ Worker-leaders at the LND like Anisimov translated its values of self-improvement into the language of worker empowerment, connecting the institution to the capital’s socialist movement.

People’s houses first emerged as focal points of political conflict during the revolution of 1905–6, sometimes with dramatic consequences. In Vologda, for example, the Pushkin People’s House was burned to the ground in May 1906, reportedly by an antirevolutionary mob. Authorities closed the Khar’kov people’s house in 1907 for several months when bombs were discovered in its smoking room.¹²⁰ The Ligovsky People’s House weathered the revolution intact, and its directors took pride in how it retained its exclusively “cultural-educational” goals and “nonparty” (*bespartiiinyi*) status during the turmoil in the capital. “Without taking upon itself any leading or directing role,” the five-year report boasted, the LND opened its doors to political meetings where debates about “all kinds of social, political, economic, and professional questions” took place.¹²¹ In reality, “*bespartiiinyi*” did not mean nonpolitical—certainly not in the eyes of the tsarist security police. At one meeting at the LND in early 1906, the police reported, “orators pronounced extremely antigovernment speeches,” while at another, typography workers stood in memory of slain revolutionary hero Lieutenant Shmidt.¹²² On May 9, 1906, a group calling itself the LND “Socio-Political Club” organized a debate on the subject of the new parliament, the State Duma. Along with speakers from the liberal Kadet and radical Socialist Revolutionary parties, the Bolshevik leader Lenin, disguised as a worker, mounted the stage to support a socialist boycott of elections.¹²³ (During the Soviet era the event won the LND a plaque and a small place in Lenin hagiography.) In addition to providing a platform for political speech, the

¹¹⁸ “Kniga glubokoi priznatel’nosti,” Pushkinskii dom, f. 223, l. 149.

¹¹⁹ Anisimov, “Kratkii ocherk Ligovskogo Narodnogo Doma,” 7.

¹²⁰ L. S. Frid, *Kul’turno-prosvetitel’naia rabota v Rossii v gody revoliutsii 1905–1907 godov* (Moscow, 1956), 21, 33.

¹²¹ *Otchet Ligovskogo Narodnogo Doma. (5-yi god)*, 3.

¹²² GARF, f. 102, op. DOO 1902, d. 992, ll. 27–28.

¹²³ V. I. Lenin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5th ed. (Moscow, 1960), 13:91–94, 564.

LND supported Russia's post-1905 parliamentary experiment by serving as a polling place for national and local elections.

Some of the LND's coworkers had connections to the revolutionary movement. Nonparty socialist Alexander Kerensky, who became prime minister in 1917, began his legal and political career at the People's House in 1904, when he and a Social Democratic colleague asked Panina to let them open a legal aid office. She consented, provided they did not use it to conduct political propaganda.¹²⁴ Elena Stasova, daughter of a leading family of the intelligentsia and a diehard Bolshevik, worked at the Museum of Pedagogical Aids, which adjoined the LND, where she reportedly hid illegal literature.¹²⁵ According to E. A. Evdokimova, another Bolshevik who worked in the LND library, an underground socialist cell conducted propaganda work and hid weapons there.¹²⁶ Among the self-conscious proletarians in the adult evening courses were several, like poet and metalworker Mashirov-Samobytnik, with socialist ties.

The nature and extent of underground socialist activity at the LND are difficult to determine, however. The major source is recollections written after the October Revolution, whose authors understandably emphasize their revolutionary work and socialist affiliations. A case in point is Mashirov-Samobytnik, who claimed he already was a Bolshevik activist when he enrolled in the evening courses at the LND in 1909. In a 1922 compilation of reminiscences about wartime revolutionary activity in Petrograd, he recounts how he won the trust of the "sentimental personalities" who headed the LND by displaying his literary talents at the evening classes. Yet he seems to have embraced the LND's values and goals—participating in the literary circle, the jubilee, and other activities to the point of becoming, in his own words, an "administrator." Threatened by arrest for the socialist activity he pursued outside of the LND, Mashirov-Samobytnik even lived there in hiding for a time.¹²⁷

Clearly the LND provided a meeting place for workers with socialist leanings and opportunities to discuss politics in its evening courses, lectures,

¹²⁴ Kerensky worked at the office for two years, through the 1905 revolution. Richard Abraham, *Alexander Kerensky, the First Love of the Revolution* (New York, 1987), 25.

¹²⁵ Adamenko, "V Ligorvskii narodnyi dom mog priiti liuboi izvozchik—za znaniiami."

¹²⁶ Evdokimova's autobiography is in Gosudarstvennyi muzei politicheskoi istorii Rossii, f. VI, no. 622; I am grateful to Dr. Liudmila Bulgakova for this reference.

¹²⁷ "Podpol'naia rabota v gody imperialisticheskoi voiny v Petrograde," *Krasnaia letopis'* no. 2/3 (1922): 129–30; Steinberg, *Proletarian Imagination*, 304–5. In an autobiography written during the 1920s, Mashirov-Samobytnik credited the LND with developing his love of literature and nurturing his literary talents. *Sovremennye raboche-krest'ianskie poety* (Ivanovo-Voznesensk, 1925), 26–28.

and literary circle. But the existence of a socialist “cell” seems difficult to prove. Post-October 1917 memoirs tend to conflate the kind of worker self-education that went on at the People’s House with organizing and radicalizing the proletariat. Perhaps in an effort to justify their involvement with such a bourgeois project, memoirists like Evdokimova and Mashirov-Samobytnik may have exaggerated the political significance of their activities. They also obscure the distinction between the quieter prewar period and wartime, when the LND briefly served as a mobilization station and when there is more evidence of political confrontations and agitation taking place there.¹²⁸

In the last year of peace before the world war, the LND’s tenth anniversary brought it national attention. Panina and her coworkers received a flood of congratulatory messages, hailing their enlightened goals and emphasizing the institution’s social and political significance. The list of senders reads like a who’s who of Russian civil society: physicians, educators, charity activists, social reformers, feminists, and the moderate socialist Labor Group in the State Duma.¹²⁹ One letter congratulated Panina and the LND for their contributions “to the emancipation of the people from ignorance and from the rusty chains of the Russian regime, which can be supported only by ignorance and savage egoism.”¹³⁰ Coworker Alexander Briantsev, whose theatrical career began at the LND, found the courage to write in his Soviet-era memoirs that the LND, despite its “bourgeois” goals, was “deservedly” esteemed by “progressive people of that time.”¹³¹ To Russia’s intelligentsia, the LND embodied their ethos of service to the deprived masses and represented a flagship for their goals of cultural uplift and democratic transformation.

Within the walls of the LND, the celebration of the tenth anniversary on April 7, 1913, was a performance of unity across its diverse constituencies. The “Cantata” received such an enthusiastic reception that the choir performed an encore, which brought the entire audience to its feet. Panina was presented with a “Book of Deep Gratitude,” a large album covered in dark blue velvet and containing dozens of letters, drawings, and poems from coworkers and visitors alike. Ardent and personal expressions of love and gratitude alternate with reverent formality in the entries.¹³² One girl in the handicraft classes put her feelings into a little rhyme:

¹²⁸ “Podpol’naia rabota,” 116–18, 120, 133–35.

¹²⁹ A large collection of congratulatory telegrams is in Gosudarstvennyi Muzei Istorii Sankt-Peterburga (GMISP), Rukopisno-dokumental’nyi fond, opis’ Ligovskii narodnyi dom.

¹³⁰ Letter from M. Nobel’-Oleinikova and [initial indecipherable] Oleinikov, 28/15 April 1913, RIII, f. 32, op. 1, ed. khr. 123, ll. 5–6.

¹³¹ Briantsev, 57. Briantsev later founded Leningrad’s Theater for Young Audiences.

¹³² “Kniga glubokoi priznatel’nosti,” Pushkinskii dom, f. 223; excerpts in *Otchet Ligovskogo Narodnogo Doma za pervoe desiatiletie*, 9–12.

I will tell you directly,
In only one verse
That you, Sofia Vladimirovna,
Are best in the universe.¹³³

Three women visitors wrote to praise the LND as a “broadly democratic” institution that upheld the values of “equality, fraternity, and liberty of the individual.”¹³⁴ Though produced for a ceremonial occasion, the tributes impress the reader with their writers’ sincerity and devotion to an institution that gave their lives meaning. Addressing a packed theater, a grateful Panina in turn praised the LND’s working-class visitors, who brought to it their “thirst for enlightenment, trust, and all good feelings.” They were not the objects of charity, she reminded them, but “our coworkers in one common enterprise of building a new, better life.” She also used the occasion to offer a barely disguised lesson in political moderation. “That better, harmonious life,” she told her audience, “is not in foreign lands, as some of our visitors think, and that truth, which is hidden from the people, is not beyond distant seas”; they must find it within the borders of their own consciousness and will and “extend a hand to each other and walk toward the designated goal in harmonious unity.”¹³⁵ The formal photograph taken at the jubilee illustrates the social and political vision it celebrated (see fig. 2). Posing on the stage of the theater, men, women, and children surround Panina and Peshekhonova in the center under portraits of literary icons Pushkin and Gogol. Some of them are dressed more formally, while others wear the clothing of the urban working class, but it is difficult to distinguish coworkers from visitors.¹³⁶ To an extent rarely matched in late imperial Russia, social relations among different classes were reimagined on the stage of the LND.

People’s houses like the LND resembled bourgeois projects all across Europe and the United States in the early twentieth century. Like their Western counterparts, Russian social reformers believed fervently in the power of knowledge and culture to transform the “dark” masses into enlightened citizens. They defined what they considered true art and literature according to the standards of high culture and encouraged behaviors, habits, and attitudes characteristic of middle-class mores: self-discipline, responsibility, and an informed view of the world. They embraced education and

¹³³ *Ia skazhu vam priamo / Lish' v odnom kuplete / Chto Vy, Sofiiia Vladimirovna, / Luchshe vsekh na svete.* “Kniga glubokoi priznatel'nosti,” l. 173.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, l. 43.

¹³⁵ *Otchet Ligovskogo Narodnogo Doma za pervoe desiatiletie*, 39.

¹³⁶ The photograph is from Tsentral'nyi gosudarstvennyi arkhiv kinofotofonodokumentov g. Sankt-Peterburga, E5291.



FIG 2. —Celebrating the tenth anniversary of the Ligovsky People’s House, April 7, 1913 (from Tsentral’nyi gosudarstvennyi arkhiv kinofotofonodokumentov g. Sankt-Peterburga, E5291).

culture as the best means of integrating the lower classes into the political, social, and cultural life of the nation. Throwing a bridge across the divide between rich and poor, another objective of all such institutions, often proved easier to aspire to than to achieve. In an examination of cross-class relations within London’s Oxford House, for example, Seth Koven writes about “the world of difference between proclaiming the virtues of democracy and acting democratically; between saying you love your brother and being loved in return by him.”¹³⁷ Similarly, it would be an exaggeration to claim that equality and democracy ruled at Panina’s People’s House; differences based on class, wealth, and education were not erased or forgotten. Despite their generally upbeat tone, the LND’s reports acknowledge that, in the words of the tenth-year report, “dissatisfaction, criticism, disunity, failures, and distress” did arise.¹³⁸ Rowdy spectators disrupted the theatrical performances, and the goal of designing an effective educational program proved elusive. A coworker in the children’s section confessed to losing his faith in the LND completely when “an entire horde of hooligans” destroyed the garden in

¹³⁷ Koven, *Slumming*, 278–79.

¹³⁸ *Otchet Ligovskogo Narodnogo Doma za pervoe desiatiletie*, 12.

the summer of 1907.¹³⁹ His distress illustrates how reformers' idealistic plans for cultural uplift sometimes clashed with the gritty realities of life in urban neighborhoods.

Russia's highly charged political environment also put efforts for social and cultural reform in the early twentieth century to an extreme test. In the midst of the revolutionary upheaval of 1905–7, Panina and her collaborators at the LND struggled to keep the institution apolitical and “above party” while still providing a public space for political debate among newly legalized political parties and voters. Although it weathered the storms of 1905 and 1906 in the capital, in the postrevolutionary period the LND contended with the same adverse conditions that had prompted its establishment in the first place: the ignorance, isolation, and poverty of the population it served and the government's obstruction of political and social progress. As the LND continued to work to create a model of citizenship, the monarchy dismissed the first and second Dumas, restricted voting rights, arrested opponents, and undermined the civil rights that it had reluctantly granted during the revolution.

But institutions for social and moral reform almost everywhere experienced official suspicion and hostility as well as internal dissension and disillusionment. The repression directed at institutions of civil society in Russia differed more in scale than in kind from that in continental Europe, where governments also kept a close eye on societies and institutions involving workers. The French state and Catholic Church, for example, often viewed secular educational initiatives like the *Ligue de l'enseignement* as threats to religion, morals, and public order and took measures to limit their influence.¹⁴⁰ Even after the Socialist Party became legal in Germany in 1890, the police applied a variety of direct and indirect means to interfere not only with its political activities but also with its efforts to provide workers with education and leisure.¹⁴¹ Nor was Russia the only state to place legal restrictions on freedom of association and public initiative; imperial Germany's strict law on associations, for example, curtailed the rights of women and minors to join voluntary associations and imposed police surveillance on public meetings.¹⁴² To a repressive and suspicious state, civil society always carried a political inflection.

Yet in Russia as in Europe, the absence of full political democracy and unfettered civil rights did not inhibit institutions like people's houses from

¹³⁹ TsGIA SPb., f. 219, op. 1, d. 4, ll. 21–22ob.

¹⁴⁰ Katherine Auspitz, *The Radical Bourgeoisie: The Ligue de l'enseignement and the Origins of the Third Republic, 1866–1885* (Cambridge, 1982).

¹⁴¹ See, for example, Alex Hall, “Youth in Rebellion: The Beginnings of the Socialist Youth Movement 1904–1914,” in *Society and Politics in Wilhelmine Germany*, ed. Richard J. Evans (London, 1978), 241–66.

¹⁴² For an insightful comparison of government regulation of civil society in Russia and continental Europe, see Bradley, *Voluntary Associations*, chap. 1.

taking root and often thriving. The history of Russian people's houses, and of the LND in particular, demonstrates the considerable contribution such institutions made toward developing civil society, democratic practices, and cross-class relationships. Within the walls of the LND people from different backgrounds interacted with each other to an extent rarely found outside its walls, on terms of comparative equality. Under its decentralized, collaborative system of governance, coworkers participated in running its operations and making decisions and developed an ethos of shared responsibility for the institution. The founder and her collaborators also included their working-class visitors as respected if not equal partners. Panina's institution sought to realize the liberal vision, in the words of William G. Rosenberg, of "socially decontextualized 'citizenship' that equalized rights for men and constructed common identities across social and national boundaries."¹⁴³ The limited but real success of such institutions in creating a new kind of civic community bolstered liberals' belief that moderate, evolutionary progress was possible in Russia and that their ideas could compete with revolutionary socialism's paradigm of class struggle.

Institutions like the LND worked because they offered the urban poor a way to satisfy real needs and desires. They transformed passive recipients of offerings of high culture into active agents of their own "self-modernization," to use Ilya Gerasimov's term. While some visitors sought only tea and entertainment on Sundays or holidays, others, especially a cohort of regulars, embraced the opportunities to realize their own aspirations for education and culture. Many men and women learned their ABCs, saw their first painting, read their first book, and attended their first play at the LND, thus taking what Panina and her coworkers regarded as the essential first steps out of "darkness" toward intellectual awakening, social consciousness, and citizenship. Visitors steadily exerted their own influence on the institution, leading Panina and the coworkers to modify and augment its offerings. They attended the productions of Ostrovskii and Shakespeare but also flocked to the movies. They revered Pushkin and Tolstoy but formed circles to write their own poetry. Out of the cohort of regular visitors there emerged a group of self-conscious, upwardly mobile male workers, the same "people aspiring to better their lives" whom Mark Steinberg and Jeffrey Brooks have described, who were Russia's first-generation readers and working-class writers.¹⁴⁴ Many of the LND's working-class visitors—admittedly a self-selecting group—

¹⁴³ William G. Rosenberg, "Representing Workers and the Liberal Narrative of Modernity," *Slavic Review* 55, no. 2 (Summer 1996): 260. One of the founders of the Constitutional Democratic Party, Ivan Petrunkevich, was Panina's stepfather, though she did not join the party until after the February 1917 Revolution.

¹⁴⁴ Steinberg, *Proletarian Imagination*, and Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read*, 269 and chap. 8. The phrase is Brooks's.

subscribed to its liberal founders' vision of cultural uplift, sociability, and citizenship.

The more sophisticated members of Petersburg's working class, familiar with socialist doctrines, pursued a long-range vision of Russia's political future that differed radically from the one held by Panina and her fellow liberals—one that was based on class difference rather than on erasing it. Yet the two groups could coexist quite productively within the walls of institutions like the LND, and the community they created made the liberals' hopes of bridging class and political boundaries seem possible. Ironically, constant government surveillance and obstruction provided reformers and visitors with a common enemy and intensified their shared identification with progress. In the decade before World War I the diverse individuals who gathered at the Ligovsky People's House formed a civil society of their own, united by faith in the transformative and empowering force of knowledge and culture.

Skeptics might still argue that most of the working people who visited institutions like Panina's only feigned compliance with the cultural ideals and apolitical ethos of their benefactors in order to obtain the benefits they offered: a warm place to meet friends, a hot cup of tea and cheap bowl of soup, free entertainment—or a safe place to hold a clandestine meeting. They could point to the impact of the 1917 revolution on the LND and its founder as evidence of the failure of the cross-class community Panina and her collaborators tried to create. One month after the Bolsheviks seized power, Panina was arrested as an “enemy of the people” and tried on charges of embezzlement and theft she allegedly committed while serving as the Provisional Government's Assistant Minister of Education. Ransomed out of prison by friends, she then allied herself with General Anton Denikin's anti-Bolshevik White Army, whose defeat in 1920 forced her to flee Russia and live the remainder of her long life as an émigré. The local soviet took over her people's house and named it after the progressive nineteenth-century poet Nekrasov (a favorite of the LND workers' literary circle); in 1926 it was transferred to the railroad workers' union and became their “palace of culture,” by which name it is still known today.

But other evidence reveals underlying continuities in the history of the Ligovsky People's House, rooted in workers' support for the reformers' original mission of social progress through individual self-improvement. Panina's arrest and trial in late 1917, for example, produced a storm of protest across Petrograd, including a mass meeting organized in her support by worker-visitors to the LND.¹⁴⁵ In the relative calm of the postrevolutionary period the LND, though now controlled by socialist authorities, continued to

¹⁴⁵ *Vestnik Partii Narodnoi Svobody*, the Kadet Party's news bulletin, printed the protests in its December 14, 1917 issue, 8–10.

offer the same kinds of activities and cultural fare as it had under Panina's leadership: theatrical performances, amateur artistic groups, and even an opera studio that presented "Eugene Onegin" and "Boris Godunov."¹⁴⁶ A number of Panina's former coworkers—Alexandra Peshekhonova and Nadezhda Ialozo, Gaideburov and Briantsev, among others—worked there well into the 1920s, while the institution continued to draw many of the same neighbors who had been coming to the building at 63 Tambovskaya Street for years. Renamed and absorbed into a new political system, the LND no longer functioned as a space for building cross-class relationships, yet it still preserved some of the elements of a working-class public sphere—a "warm and comfortable place" for conversation, a game of chess, a concert or evening class—that prerevolutionary advocates of people's houses had envisioned.

One event, the celebration of the LND's twentieth anniversary in April 1923, reveals with special clarity the complicated relationship such institutions had with their prerevolutionary past and the Soviet present. Decorated for the occasion, the building conveyed the LND's dual identity: along with exhibits on its prerevolutionary history, banners affirmed its revolutionary credentials, like the one that proclaimed, "the Paninists destroyed the autocracy, the Nekrasovites are creating a new life!" The lengthy official ceremony opened with a history of the LND, written by Peshekhonova and read by Briantsev, followed by Mashirov-Samobytnik, who read his poem on "What the People's House Did for the Revolution." Worker-students of the LND who had perished in the revolution were honored, and a pageant reenacted moments in the city's revolutionary past. Officials awarded Peshekhonova and Popova, founders of the institution, the title "Hero of Labor."

Once the official ceremony finally ended at 3 am, however, about 250 former coworkers and visitors assembled for their own, quieter celebration. Out of earshot of the authorities, they reminisced fondly about the LND's prerevolutionary days. They read aloud the heartfelt message that Panina had managed to send from Geneva and elected a committee to compose a reply.¹⁴⁷ The collective letter they produced and sent to Panina expressed their affection and gratitude toward her, their devotion to the LND's ideals, and their pride in its success in "transferring knowledge to many, many cohorts [*sme-nam*] of half-literate people and to the overall development of the Russian workers' movement." While acknowledging that political differences divided the former coworkers and working-class visitors, the letter affirmed that they continued to speak a "common language" and to share a commitment to the "goals that were set when the People's House was founded." "No one will

¹⁴⁶ V. T. Novikov, "Posleslovie," in S. V. Panina, *Na Peterburgskoi okraïne* (St. Petersburg, 2003), 86.

¹⁴⁷ Letter of Alexandra Peshekhonova to Sofia Panina, dated April 28 [1923, Petrograd], in BAR Panina, box 7, Arranged Correspondence, folder Peshekhonova.

doubt," the letter continued, "that only continual and intensive educational work in [our] native land, culturally backward but precious to all of us, is capable of curing its enduring ills, its age-old poverty."¹⁴⁸

Across the transatlantic archipelago of civic and social reform institutions, success and even survival depended not on preexisting democratic conditions—Russian people's houses put down deep roots despite an authoritarian political system—but on a measure of political and economic stability and on the masses' willingness to believe in the power of education and culture to ameliorate social and economic ills. Before World War I, when Russia enjoyed at least a tenuous stability, the popularity of people's houses among workers helped sustain liberals' vision of evolutionary progress. War followed by revolution and civil war destroyed the fragile alliance between classes on which people's houses had been built. The Bolshevik takeover would seem to have ended this kind of social experiment in Russia, along with the civil society it helped to develop. But many of the country's new leaders and their proletarian constituents continued to believe in the civilizing power of knowledge and art. Prerevolutionary institutions like Panina's people's house not only survived but even gained new life as Soviet palaces of culture, where worker and peasant visitors memorized Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* and Mayakovsky's revolutionary odes, listened to Chopin and jazz, and continued their pursuit of cultural enlightenment as they undertook to build socialism.

¹⁴⁸ The letter is in BAR Panina, box 14, folder Narodnyi Dom—St. Petersburg. As late as 1958, former worker-visitors to the LND recalled its importance to their intellectual and political development at a celebration of Gaideburov's career; Dreiden, "Stranitsy bol'shoi zhizni," 3–5.