

## Critical Comedy and the Zealous Zoschenko

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### Preface

The social realities for the Soviet population following the revolution are extremely unique to the Soviet Union, despite how complex they may be. One of the most radical changes to the society was the institutionalization of the *Kommunalka*, otherwise known as the communist apartment or communal apartment. This was done to solve the major housing crisis that was ongoing following the end of the civil war, while also providing a means of surveilling their people. One of the authors who discuss this process and the repercussions is Paola Messana, who was able to get first person accounts of how it was to live in communist apartments. One such person described how, “other than high-up communists, there were few who escaped the collective apartment, where even KGB agents and spies were housed.”<sup>28</sup> Rarely in history does one see such a generally universal experience of living, such as in that of the *Kommunalka*, however, “up until the mid-1960s, 80 percent of the population in the cities were affected, from Moscow to Baku.”<sup>29</sup> Another important factor to mention before delving further into the societal mechanics of the *Kommunalkas* is that there is a disconnect between Zoshchenko and Messana. Aside from being fictional, Zoshchenko’s characters would not experience the effects of the purges in the 1930s, while many of Messana’s interviewees did. However, Zoshchenko did experience the various denunciations that would have been occurring around and following the time of the revolution of 1917. This is important to note as it may affect the perspectives that many of the seventy, eighty, and ninety-year-old Russians who had lived in the communal apartments during that period.

### Background: Zoshchenko

To understand the thought process of Zoshchenko, one must first examine his literary life and the reasoning, or lack thereof, behind his

villainization as an author. Zoshchenko was well loved within the Soviet Union for many years and his work, *Nervous People and Other Short Stories* was considered to be a classic up until his vilification by the interior.<sup>30</sup> The type of distrust and paranoia that many people felt during the Stalinist years were very clearly felt by Zoshchenko after his works were denounced. After Zoshchenko was expelled from the Writers Union, he no longer was given vouchers for food for his family and many institutions that had given him advanced royalties for his works were asking for him to return them.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, after the death of Stalin, Zoshchenko attempted to get fully reinstated but was denied that as it would have proven that the government had made a mistake in the first place.<sup>32</sup> These types of disagreements would continue to exist between Zoshchenko and the Soviet Union up until his death in 1958. Despite the condemnation of his works, many people continued to retell his stories because they were so relatable to them. There were no huge hard-hitting victories, nor were there any socialist heroes. It was all, to put it simply, about the lives of the people. What was “hard hitting” about Zoshchenko’s works, was the social reality that it contained. Zoshchenko’s works were outlawed because “one was not supposed to notice these things,” as they were deemed trivial and unimportant.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, it was seemingly Zoshchenko’s awareness of what was going on within the society, combined with his immense popularity, and his ability to recognize the many small chips and scratches within the pure perfection of Soviet Reality, that ultimately led to his fall from personal literary grace.

## Introduction

In this paper, I will be discussing Zoshchenko’s work, *Nervous People and Other Short Stories*, and the extent to which various stories corresponded to the social realities of the urban life in communist apartment during the Soviet 1920s and pushing into the 1930s. First of all, I will analyze the downfall of Russian society in the 1920s to interpret whether or not Zoshchenko’s short story, “Nervous People” within *Nervous people and Other Short Stories*, is accurate to the social reality of the Soviet Union. I will approach this using two perspectives: the state priority of surveilling their population and how it affected the people forced into such context, and the first-person perspective

of living in said context. Second of all, a sense of fear permeated into the aristocracy of the Soviet Union's society after the fall of the tsar due to the consistent hunting of people who were of the upper class, while those who were veterans of the red guard, had government jobs, or who were of the proletariat, felt stable within their societal position, or became part of the new "upper class." Everyone with a potential to have ties to the white guard or the aristocracy had deep ingrained fear of what could happen to them if their background were to be discovered. Third, the shift from the old impoverished/aristocracy system to one of cramped collective poverty caused a combined sense of irritability and despair to permeate the physical culture of Russia under the Soviets. This will focus in more closely on the misery of people and how it affected Soviet society in the late 1920s and early 1930s. In contrast, the writings of Zoshchenko fail to approach or satirize the various denunciations that occurred, going all the way back to the revolution. This was likely due to the fear of being denounced sooner than he did for speaking out against the Bolsheviks.

### Section 1: Irritable People

First, Zoshchenko writes many satirical short stories about the social realities of post-revolutionary Russia. The story, "Nervous People" discusses the general distrust and irritability that permeated the Kommunalka, or communist apartments because of the downfall of privacy due to communal living. A summary of the short story: the people within the apartment begin a brawl over a brush that is eventually broken up by an officer. They then get sent to court and end up in another brawl at the end of the story because the "Judge turned out to be a nervous kind of man too."<sup>34</sup> The public aspect of the Kommunalka, as described by Harris, discusses the idea that the Kommunalka were a form of "hybrid space, which [he] calls 'public privacy.'"<sup>35</sup> This statement is extremely etymologically flawed because it is a contradiction about a basic social practice of privacy. The ability to feel that one had privacy and to pursue a sense of privacy was in

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<sup>34</sup> Zoshchenko, Mikhail. *Nervous People and Other Satires*. London: Victor Gollancz LTD, 1963. 124-126.

<sup>35</sup> Harris, Steven E. (Steven Emmett). "In Search of "Ordinary" Russia: Everyday Life in the NEP, the Thaw, and the Communal Apartment." *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 6, no. 3 (2005): 583-614. doi:10.1353/kri.2005.0038. Pg. 604.

the hands of the family units themselves, the main issue being that it was mostly a symbolic matter.<sup>36</sup> This type of symbolic privacy was needed because the switch to communal living from their former way of life had caused many people to feel a growing sensation of alienation due to their disconnection with their old way of life, “their habitat,” as put by Gerasimova.<sup>37</sup> According to an interview from Messana’s book, “communal life was terrifying,” largely because of the immense amounts of pettiness around space within the former family’s home.<sup>38</sup> Despite the person having formerly owned the house and having furniture and other material goods in the house, the new forcible tenant were acting as though the house had never belonged to the family in the first place.<sup>39</sup> Hence, the public opinion of living within the communal apartment was one of tension and agitation, especially toward those who had formerly owned the house and had been privileged. This story alone shows that Zoshchenko was not far from reality in his telling of nervous people.<sup>40</sup>

The other aspect of the short story, “Nervous People,” is that of the government’s involvement in the communal apartment itself. Although the government is not mentioned at length or in detail, their involvement in the communist apartments following their formation, was not passive. The Bolsheviks and Lenin purposefully eliminated the individual and private family home in order to produce a collective living situation that prevents any one family from having the privilege of a private home.<sup>41</sup> According to Harris, “ following the communal apartment’s emergence, the state used it as a tool for maintaining dominance over its urban population but never transformed it into an ideal for the domestic sphere.”<sup>42</sup> This level of government control was likely implemented due to the types of small level disorder and revolutions that were ongoing in the countryside following the Petrograd revolt, as well as a means of preventing any more counterrevolutionary activity. This collectivization of swaths of

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 606.

<sup>38</sup> Messana, 9.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Note: however it would seem that he did not mean nervous as in the fearful kind, but rather nervous as in “filled with nerves” or agitated.

<sup>41</sup> Harris, 608.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 605.

their population would allow them to maintain control over the people. The other aspect that likely played a role in this variety of surveillance and suppression would be that there was a former elite that remained within the urban population, hiding in plain sight. Overall, it was all for the sake of a collectivized social situation that would prevent the loss of power from the Bolshevik, and later Stalinist governments.

## Section 2: The Fearful Aristocrat and the Prospering Peasant

Third, fear saturated aristocratic Soviet society during and following the revolution of 1917, especially for those who were connected to the White guard. Many were often suspicious or possibly even jealous of those who were of the old aristocracy, hence why the roles of workers and the bourgeoisie were inverted by the Bolsheviks. There are two prominent perspectives that must be approached on this topic: that of the former aristocrat and that of the new aristocracy. The bourgeois aristocrat must be discussed first as many of the issues that arise during the 1920s are connected to them. After the collectivized housing initiative was implemented by Lenin and the Bolsheviks, the situation became much worse for the aristocracy. Although many aristocrats stayed in Soviet Union, many more fled from it following the revolution, only to return during the Khrushchev years.<sup>43</sup> Messana interviewed one individual whose father lacked fear of using his wealth after the collectivized housing was initiated. For her family, despite food shortages, their “table had everything: crab salad, black caviar, [her father] also bought little light biscuits with which he made a cake by adding butter, coffee, and cognac.”<sup>44</sup> Aside from this clear presentation of their wealth, her father had also been a member of the white guard.<sup>45</sup> She goes on to tell of “‘Chernyi Voron,’ the black crow, the van [that] was parked in the street” and goes on to tell of how the sound of an idling car outside her home still scares her.<sup>46</sup> To elaborate, the “Chernyi Voron” were essentially what she was referring to as the government officials who came and took her father away, despite the lack of evidence that he had ever been in the white guard.<sup>47</sup> This was a

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<sup>43</sup> Messana, 24.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>45</sup> Messana, 31.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

fairly common occurrence during the 1920s for aristocratic Russians, hence why they had so much fear the longer the Bolshevik government was in power. These government officials, these “Chernyi Voron,” were the individuals that Zoshchenko’s short story, “Dog Scent,” discusses, however other short stories such as.<sup>48</sup> Hence, the sense of fear that permeated society was mostly within those who knew they had aristocratic lineage or were former aristocrats themselves. Fear permeated through these people because they were deemed dangerous or as war criminals for having fought with the white guard.

The other side of this reality, especially during the early years of the 1920s, lies with the perspective of the common proletariat, government workers, and anyone else who had not been an aristocrat. For some people, the living conditions were extremely cramped, however they did not seem to mind too much. Messina interviewed one individual who had lived in an apartment with 32 people, a Liubov Vasilievna Zakharova.<sup>49</sup> Her “father was, of course, a responsible civil servant, a member of the Party,” hence, her family was substantially more privileged.<sup>50</sup> Because of the father’s status within the party, they weren’t treated as equals to the rest of the population, but in fact were treated better by being given three rooms and a maid rather than the standard single room.<sup>51</sup> This shows that, rather than there no longer being an aristocracy, there was instead a more modest and new age version of aristocracy, providing privileges in return for service to the party. Furthermore, while the old aristocracy was fearful of such things, the other people would have parties where “all the women would make cakes, [and they] would put the “patefon” in the kitchen, bringing out the vodka, and everybody danced.”<sup>52</sup> This shows that at least some portions of the Soviet population were able to enjoy life within their context. This testimony presents the communist party, not as villains who insight fear in their people, but rather as individuals who attained power from those who had formerly had power, choosing to use it as a source of revenge. Hence, the aristocracy had good reason to fear their situation as it had been an inversion of the rolls of people who had

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<sup>48</sup> Zoshchenko, Pg. 134-136.

<sup>49</sup> Messina, 12.

<sup>50</sup> Messina, 12.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

trodden on the peasants and workers, to being the people who would be trodden on by the peasants and the workers.

### **Section 3: The Everyday Poverty, Despair, and Misery of the Average Soviet Citizen**

Fourth of all, the transition from the binary of the old aristocracy/mass poverty system, to a system in which the people of the Soviet Union experienced collective poverty throughout the 1920s and into the 1930s, caused the society to devolve into a general sense of despair and misery which permeated the physical society of the Soviet Union. Furthermore, the clear bias that the Bolshevik and Stalinist governments had towards members of the party was clearly shown through their apartment building policies. Many of the stories within Zoshchenko's work tell of the effects of poverty upon the people. One such story, somewhat ironically called "Poverty," discusses the bringing of cheaper electric light sources to the communal houses. There are three characters who all have differing perspectives on the newfound light. The commonality amongst all of them is that they all realized how disgusting their living situations were and the landlady could not afford to fix her place up, so instead decided to cut the electrical wires, thus resulting in the other characters labelling her as bourgeoisie.<sup>53</sup> They likely labelled her this way because she was unwilling to improve and progress with the rest of the society, but the idea that the bourgeoisie would have the least money and be the most depressed, is not something alien to soviet reality. Although some may have had an easier time in the communal apartments, as some of Messana's interviews seem to imply, many of the people of the Soviet Union were suffering within their circumstances. Part of the reason for this was because of the type of binary that had previously existed between the aristocracy and the peasant/working class. When they were pushed together by the process of collectivization, there was little many could do. This binary that existed between the aristocracy and the peasant working class did not immediately dissipate the moment the Bolsheviks began their communist apartment program. It is this binary that requires the different contexts to be recognized and compared to

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<sup>53</sup> Zoshchenko, 141-143.

Zoshchenko's works.

Class ascription played a huge role in the matter of living situation, even for those of the peasant classes. Amongst peasant classes, there were groups that the government wanted to eliminate. This is largely about class ascription and the fears that many people had over whether they would be "liquidated" from the society or not.<sup>54</sup> Some of the classes targeted that Fitzpatrick discusses, are those of the Kulaks and the Nepmen, or New Economic Policy men. The Kulaks were entrepreneurs and the Nepmen were localized merchant entrepreneurs. The idea that such people would be considered a threat to soviet society is not surprising from a teleological point of view, however in their time, it would have been more like they were briefly freed from the oppressive imperialist system, only to be suppressed under a different system. One of the people that Messana interviewed stated that they, "lived such miserable lives, everyone was poor."<sup>55</sup> This perspective exposes much more of the context, showing that, indeed, everyone was lacking in finances and struggling to maintain their own lives. She goes on to say that, "it was like a nightmare from which I had to wake up. But then life would go on: you had to get up, go to work, keep on going."<sup>56</sup> This is very telling of the common experience of many of those of the urban population. One Romanian woman who had escaped a Soviet camp in the early 1930s described how the Soviets would also track down individuals who had escaped their camps. The context is that she escaped with her child, but she says that they went searching for her and tracked her down, choosing to bring her back to the soviet union and then banishing her to Siberia.<sup>57</sup> the common strategy to attain their Bolshevik desired form of social reality was: "transforming its citizens through industrialization, urbanization, collectivization, and political indoctrination and terror, the most ordinary aspects of everyday life."<sup>58</sup> In this sense of policy, as perceived by a witness, the Bolsheviks show that they did not care about the happiness of their people, but rather that the public felt that they were a negative force upon the country. Hence, the misery of poverty

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<sup>54</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Ascribing Class: The Construction of Social Identity in Soviet Russia," *The Journal of Modern History*, vol. 65, no. 4. (Dec. 1993), pg. 745

<sup>55</sup> Messana, 35.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid* 36

<sup>58</sup> Harris Pg. 584



even permeated into the former lower classes of society because of the extreme policies and actions of the Bolshevik government.

Although the common mood of the Bolsheviks toward the common citizen within the Soviet Union was seemingly poor, the former aristocracy came to suffer much more as they had experienced what it was like to live in luxury. This is not to say that the Bolsheviks did not punish them for having done so, but rather to express how great and sudden a fall it would have been for many of the aristocracy. One of Messana's interviews mentions the common perspective of the Bolsheviks as them asking "how do [gentlemen] explain these luxurious apartments? It is shameful. You must share them with the workers."<sup>59</sup> This was how many of the aristocracy viewed the sudden implementation of the collectivized apartments. One of Messana's interviews discuss the absolute terror and misery of life in her own home after it was transitioned into a communist apartment. She discusses how the residents of different classes would "measure every square inch of the hallway and other common areas and complain about the furniture—good furniture—that my mother had left," claiming that their furniture should all be put in their own room.<sup>60</sup> Not only does this show the types of circumstances that the Bolsheviks forced many families into, it also shows how jaded classes were about aristocrats. This was all part of their plan to control housing, annihilate the idea of private homes, hence pushing their society towards "the adoption of collectivist forms of housing over ones that privileged the individual and the family."<sup>61</sup> The aristocrats who were not initially exposed were tried to live in communal living without ever speaking of their nobility.<sup>62</sup> Those who were exposed grew up with a sense of terror, "enduring daily humiliation."<sup>63</sup> This was the social reality of many former aristocrats within the society. After analyzing the standpoints of the former peasant and the former aristocrat, it seems clear that Zoshchenko's works were not far off. Works such as "A Summer Breather," briefly approach the idea that it is very bourgeois to live in an apartment with just one's family.<sup>64</sup> Another of his works, "The

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<sup>59</sup> Messana pg. 8

<sup>60</sup> Ibid 9

<sup>61</sup> Harris 608

<sup>62</sup> Messana 24

<sup>63</sup> Ibid 10

<sup>64</sup> Zoshchenko 162

Lady Aristocrat,” villainized aristocratic women for being frivolous, especially when consuming expensive products such as pastries.<sup>65</sup> This particular dialogue was likely inserted for the purpose of making fun of aristocratic women rather than trying to be totally true to form, though one would imagine that an aristocrat would not have the same grasp on finances as that of a proletariat. Zoshchenko focuses more on the life of those who lived in the apartments, regardless of background, however when we did comment on class, he made sure it was pro Bolshevik to a certain extent. It was only when discussing guilt that Zoshchenko shifts his point of view to satirize the use of instinct, as discussed earlier.<sup>66</sup> One could argue that this is his way of discussing the complexities of denunciation, having to be self-denounced rather than denounced by another.

#### **Section 4: Denunciations, their role in Soviet Society and the missing piece within Zoshchano’s Satirical Puzzle**

Although Zoshchenko does not explicitly reference denunciations, they must still be discussed in reference to communal apartments as they were ongoing prior to, and especially during the Terror years. The Bolsheviks were largely concerned with a pure society, free of corruption, hence the Bolsheviks would question their members annually about themselves, as well as the criticisms and accusations that had been put against them.<sup>67</sup> Furthermore, the Bolsheviks were largely concerned with purging what they called, “Class enemies,” that referring to nepmen, kulaks, and any other remaining class that could be considered bourgeois or bourgeoisie related.<sup>68</sup> Denunciations for personal gain was not an uncommon practice either. Although it occurred much more during Stalin’s Terror, the denunciations of people for the purpose of personal gain was an extremely common practice in Soviet Russia during the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>69</sup>

This raises the question: why did Zoshchenko not mention or

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid 129

<sup>66</sup> Ibid 134-136

<sup>67</sup> Fitzpatrick, Shelia. “Signals from Below: Soviet Letters of Denunciation of the 1930s”. *The Journal of Modern History* 68, no. 4 (Dec. 1996): 831-866. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2946722>  
Pg. 832

<sup>68</sup> Ibid

<sup>69</sup> Ibid 834

satirize these denunciations within his work? The simple answer is that he had to run everything he published through the central committee.<sup>70</sup> Despite what he was saying about society, he was largely focused on the gradual change of Soviet society through small rebellions that would get approved by the committee. On the other hand, he could have simply found the reality around him to be rather morose, so he decided to write some relatable comedy for his fellow comrades. Most of his comedy seems to focus upon satirizing everyday tasks, occurrences, and the occasional proverbial “jab” at the old aristocracy. Fitzpatrick even state that the topic of denunciation has not had any sort of extensive academic inquiries because of the extreme levels of private classification that the Soviet government held the denunciation files under up until the fall of the Soviet Union in the 1990s.<sup>71</sup> Just as fear had caused many of the aristocratic class to hide their lineage, as well as their identities at times, fear seems to have prevented Zoshchenko from publishing any short stories satirizing denunciations.

## Conclusion

In Conclusion, many of Zoshchenko’s works discuss the various everyday jokes and problems within society in a satirical manner. The transition of society to communal living was largely affected by the circumstances of each individual. Regardless of their class, the apartments that most citizens were staying in were used for the purpose of surveillance and preventing counterrevolutionary activities.<sup>72</sup> Because of this surveillance, the attainment of privacy then fell upon the civilian as they would need to seek out privacy for their family on their own accord.<sup>73</sup> Privacy was not deemed a right anymore due to the collective initiatives of the Bolshevik government. Furthermore, privacy became a matter of symbolism rather than reality because of the constant suspicions and denunciations that people would be experiencing within Soviet society.<sup>74</sup> Many of the societal structures of privacy were changed in order to prevent any more revolutionary activity, thus securing Bolshevik control over Russia. This is key to

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<sup>70</sup> Milne 2

<sup>71</sup> Fitzpatrick 835

<sup>72</sup> Harris 584

<sup>73</sup> Ibid 604

<sup>74</sup> Ibid

Zoshchenko's satires because this series of events is what creates the circumstances in which he writes in the first place. The fear that spread through society was experienced by both the peasant and aristocratic classes, just in different ways. On the one hand, the peasant and working classes enjoyed some festivities, general life fulfillment, and seeking revenge against those who oppressed them. This had been what went on in the early years, however, as time went on, it seems that most everyone except those of higher political status would fear what was to come, and even those in the party would struggle with denunciations.<sup>75</sup> In the background of society, the aristocrats were consistently being sought out, then later denounced. The issue that arose with this was that people were basing denunciations on instinct, much like a hound hunts birds.<sup>76</sup> As time went on, the situation got worse for all the classes of Soviet society. Class ascription played a huge role in this matter as the hunt for people who had capitalistic ideals, such as nepmen, kulaks, and hidden aristocrats, were deemed unworthy to exist within the society. This leads to the constantly growing issue of denunciations within the society, largely with the purpose of self-interested gain in mind. The longer the government and the people stagnated in this society of distrust and disloyalty, the more denunciations and guilt built up within the very structures that the Bolsheviks had hoped to purify.<sup>77</sup> This leaves the question: to what extent were Zoshchenko's satires accurate to society? Ultimately, the answer is that Zoshchenko could only be as accurate to society as the Bolshevik government would allow him to be. Despite his continuous effort to get approval from the interior and the writers' union, Zoshchenko became a literary casualty within the very society that he wrote so many satires about. Furthermore, he fell victim to one of the few aspects of Soviet society that he could not satirize: he fell victim to a denunciation, seemingly from Stalin himself. Regardless of his denunciation, his works continued to live on within Soviet society. It was the immense relatability of Zoshchenko's works that made him so popular to the society, hence, Zoshchenko's satires were meant to be relatable and only as accurate as the Bolsheviks and comedy would allow him.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Fitzpatrick 834

<sup>76</sup> Zoshchenko, Pg. 134-136

<sup>77</sup> Ibid

<sup>78</sup> By comedy, I mean it involves a level of distortion in order to attain the desired reaction.

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