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Made in the U.S.S.R. Is Now Made in China

By Khristina Narizhnaya

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Many souvenirs that look like they came from the Soviet era, like this portrait of Lenin framed with the Russian flag's colors, are in fact made in China. **Igor Tabakov**

Twenty years ago, Moscow's Izmailovsky Park was a place where artisans and antique collectors got together on weekends to mingle, have a drink and maybe sell something to interested foreigners.

Alexei, a nesting doll painter who now sells Soviet antiques, said profits from the sale of one doll, also known as a matryoshka, would feed him for a month back then.

Tourists were richer, looking for unique masterpieces. The vibe was laid back, bohemian, authentic.

Now it's all about business. Most stalls are manned by merchants, not the artisans.

The tourists spend less. Cheaper souvenirs are in demand — and many are made in China.

“It was cool before, everyone was an artist. Now they’re businessmen,” said Alexei, who did not want his last name mentioned for fear that it may harm his business. “There is more competition, fakes.”

Each year, less expensive European antiques and folk items made in other countries spread to more and more stands, leaving less space for icons and pricier local pieces.

Chinese-made souvenirs, like flasks, lighters and key chains with Soviet or Russian symbols, even replaced those made domestically about five years ago.

Basic items are mass-produced in China very cheaply. Then a real Russian pin, or sometimes a Chinese knockoff, with a star, Lenin or a red flag, is glued or welded on.

Not long ago, wood carver Oleg Avdeyev began selling Chinese-made trinkets with Communist stars and red flags alongside wooden boxes and etchings he carves himself. “Space is expensive, I had to diversify,” Avdeyev said. For every two of his own wooden items sold, he sells one of the Chinese products.

Merchants report a greater interest in souvenirs with Soviet insignia. A lighter with a red star is more popular than a lighter with the double-headed eagle, the symbol of the Russian Federation.

“Americans don’t know what the Russian emblem looks like, but they know the Soviet Union,” said Denis, who has peddled cheap souvenirs at Izmailovsky Park for more than 15 years. He did not want his last name mentioned for the same reasons as Alexei. “Lenin would outsell Putin any day.”

Last week Denis, who makes about 30,000 rubles ($1,000) per month at his stall, sold his entire stock of 15 pins with the hammer and sickle, and only one with the double-headed eagle.

Chinese-made “Russian” items are not only sold in Izmailovsky Park. In Skazka, a souvenir store on Arbat, the wide array of nesting dolls, jewelry and shawls overwhelm the small display of ubiquitous flasks and lighters with Lenin stars in the front of the store.

The cheaper items made in China sell for considerably less than the matryoshkas and jewelry, but they still contribute about 3,000 to 4,000 rubles a day to the store’s turnover, manager Natalya Semenkina said.

Many factories that used to make Soviet pins and other related trinkets shut down right after the Soviet breakup, leaving millions of products available from old stocks. They were very popular souvenirs in the 1990s.

As more tourists buy Chinese-made “Russian” souvenirs that cost less than 300 rubles, vendors of genuine Soviet relics — like pins, army gear and antiques — are seeing sales decline. “Interest in the old country passed about five to seven years ago,” said Nikolai, who has been selling real pins at his stand in Izmailovsky Park for the last 10 years. He also did not want his last name mentioned because it could harm his business.

Now Nikolai can bring in about 100,000 rubles in a good month, but he doesn’t see any

perspective in the growth of the market. Nikolai's customers are mostly local pin collectors. They are growing old, and there is not enough interest from the younger generation.

Sergei, who sells Soviet military gear at Izmailovsky Park, said interest in his products fell sharply around 2005.

His wares include army hats that range in price from 700 to 6,000 rubles, 50-year-old belts worn by generals and officers that cost as much as 5,000 rubles, and Soviet banners and flags that run from 1,000 to 3,000 rubles. Sergei manages to sell about 150 items per month, working only weekends. But before it was much more.

His customers are dealers that buy items for their stores, nostalgic Russians and random foreigners.

A couple from Indonesia picked up a yellow metal belt that used to belong to a general. The young man held it up to his pants, but put it back once he was told the 5,000 ruble price.

Antiques vendor Andrei Malyshev said the last 15 years have seen less Russian and more European antiques on sale in Izmailovsky.

Fake Soviet memorabilia made in China includes busts of Lenin, Stalin and other prominent figures. They are usually lighter in weight and have misspellings, Malyshev said.

"You can pay $1,000 or $2,000 dollars for a huge order [of basic souvenirs] made in China," said Pyotr Yenov, who has the only pin store in Izmailovsky Park and owns a pin factory in the Moscow region.

A few years ago several Chinese businessmen visited Yenov's store and proposed a partnership. They offered to manufacture pins for Yenov for much cheaper than his factory. But Yenov declined. He said he is a patriot, and besides, he does not trust their quality.

Despite the influx of foreign-made products, there are still many original Russian items at Izmailovsky.

The Chinese have not yet mastered matryoshkas, jewelry boxes, jewelry and shawls, Alexei said.

Once a vendor tried to sell Grandfather Frost nesting dolls made in China.

"People noticed there was something not quite right," Alexei said. "The colors were dead, and the [faces of the] dolls looked Chinese."

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