

by imagination is the sheer impetus of people doing it, saying: in spite of everything we are still building this future, and we are looking forward to the future with enormous confidence.

The plate brings us what one of the ceramic artists called 'news from a radiant future'. Normally regimes will revisit and reorder the past, appropriating it to their current needs, as we have seen many times, but the Bolsheviks wanted people to believe that the past was over and that the new world was going to be built from scratch.

This image of the new egalitarian world of the proletariat is painted on porcelain – the luxury material historically associated with aristocratic culture and privilege. Painted by hand over the glaze, it was for display, not for use. The plate is scallop-edged and very fine – it was in fact a blank made before the Revolution that had been left over from the Porcelain Factory's imperial days. The Empress Elizabeth had set up the Imperial Porcelain Factory near St Petersburg in the eighteenth century, to produce porcelain which would rival the best that Europe could offer, for use at court and for official imperial gifts, as Mikhail Piotrovsky, Director of Russia's State Hermitage Museum, explains:

Russian porcelain became an important part of Russian cultural production. Russian Imperial Porcelain became famous: beautiful dishes that are now extremely expensive at world auctions. It is a good example of art in connection with economy and politics, because it was always a kind of expression of Russian empire – military pictures, military parades, the love of life of ordinary people, pictures from the Hermitage – everything which Russia wanted to present to the world and to itself in a beautiful manner

This plate is an example in microcosm of the way in which the Soviet rhetoric of total rupture could never match the reality: given the speed of the Revolution, the Bolsheviks had to take over existing structures where they could, so much of Soviet Russia continued to echo Tsarist patterns. They had to do it that way – but in this case, they deliberately *chose* to do it. On the back of the plate are two factory marks. Underneath the glaze, applied when the blank plate was first made, is the Imperial Porcelain mark of Tsar Nicholas II for the year 1901. Over the glaze is painted the hammer and sickle of the Soviet

State Porcelain Factory and the date 1921. This painted plate was made in two stages, twenty years apart, and in astonishingly different political circumstances.

You would have expected the Tsar's monogram to have been painted over, blotting out the imperial connection, and it often was. But, as somebody at the factory realized, there was a great advantage in leaving both marks visible. It made what was already a collector's item even more desirable, so it could be sold abroad for a much higher price. The regime was desperate to raise foreign currency, and the sale of artistic and historic objects like this plate was one obvious part of the solution. The records of the new State Porcelain Factory report that, 'For foreign markets the presence of these marks alongside the Soviet marks is of great interest, and prices for the objects abroad shall doubtless be set higher if the earlier marks are not painted over.'

So we have the surprising situation of a socialist revolutionary regime making luxury goods to sell to the capitalist world. And you could argue this was perfectly coherent: profits from the plate supported Soviet international action, designed to undermine the very capitalists they were selling to, while at the same time the porcelain propaganda promulgated the Soviet message to Russian enemies. 'Artistic industry,' wrote the critic Yakov Tugenkhold in 1923, 'is that happy battering ram which has already broken down the wall of international isolation.'

This conflicted, symbiotic relationship between the Soviet and the capitalist worlds – initially seen as a transitional necessity until the West was won for workers and communism – became the norm for the rest of the century. The front of the plate shows us the compelling clarity of the early Bolshevik dream. The back shows us pragmatic compromise – negotiation with the imperial past and political realities, and a complex economic *modus vivendi* with the capitalist world. Broadly, this is the pattern that would be sustained for the next seventy years as the world settled into two huge, competing but in many ways interdependent ideological blocs. The front and back of this plate chart the path from worldwide revolution to the stability of the Cold War.