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Social Reform in the Kopeck Newspapers of Imperial Russia

Late Imperial Russia's hundreds of kopeck newspapers were sensational, entertaining, and accessible. Scholars have made much of their local and lurid character, but usually interpret them as windows into the drama of urban life rather than as potential sources of political activity. However, the editors and journalists of the Russian penny press placed no such restrictions on their scope. In their editorial framing, kopeck newspapers regularly described, discussed, and debated political topics, professing to be non-partisan but never non-political. In this paper, I examine how kopeck newspapers campaigned for progressive social reform in the final decade of the Russian Empire. Appeals to reform often focused on local matters directly relevant to the newspapers' urban audience, such as public health, transportation, and municipal governance, but also included critiques of wider problems and proposals for empire-wide political, economic, and social change. The great readerships of these newspapers, in turn, situated penny newspapers and their editors as influential agitators for reform, in their own eyes and in the eyes of the state. Finally, I suggest that such political engagement may have been part of the penny press's broad popularity and success, rather than something incidental to popularity gained from lurid sensationalism.