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THE (UN)GOVERNED MARKET, OR THE HISTORY OF RUSSIAN PHARMA. A DYSTOPIA

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The article presents design of historical study of the Russian pharmaceutical market, setting timeline in the nineties — the time of formation of social and cultural characteristics of this phenomenon. At the same time, the authors return to the post-Soviet period and the nineties to see starting positions as well as mutations of original idea. The article is structured by the framework format of dissertation abstract. This frame contains the following elements: research questions, assessment of state of research field, working hypotheses, the author's vision of social and scientific significance of the study being conducted and observations made. The definition of the research genre as dystopia is explained by its deconstruction of the palimpsest of memory testimonies of pharmaceutical market actors.

K e y w o r d s : history of markets; history of medicine; economic history; Russian pharmaceuticals.

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The title of this article is derived from archival documents. This characterization of the market (along with its synonym for "ungoverned"—"uncontrolled" [1]) is not a scientific definition but was frequently employed by Russian officials and businesspeople of the 1990s. These individuals envisioned the emergence of an ideal ("stable", "civilized" [2], "normal") market model in the country, contrasting this aspiration with the chaotic and unpredictable realities of contemporary Russian life [3]. Our reflections are presented in a vintage format reminiscent of a Soviet dissertation abstract: structured into analogous thematic sections and translated into modern academic language.

Relevance, or The Point of Entry

How did we arrive at this topic? The temporal point of entry for this project was the beginning of 2020, a year that plunged the world into a pandemic and everything associated with it. People around us suffered and died, while governments scrambled to procure disinfectants and medications. Our contemporaries sought a panacea for COVID-19, whether in potent antimalarial drugs, ginger, or even toilet paper. At the same time, everyone followed statistical updates, debated pharmaceutical production, viruses, laboratories, and vaccines, and, as a result, felt a bit like infectious disease specialists or pharmacists. This was our first impetus.

The second impetus came from friends of ours — former physicians who had transitioned into the pharmaceutical business during the 1990s. We were familiar with their fates and stories, recognizing that these fascinating adventures were unlikely to make their way into archives. We also felt acutely aware of the unique and ephemeral nature of these historical sources.

And thirdly, every visitor to Moscow could not help but marvel at the sheer number of pharmacies in the city — almost every building seemed to house one, and they resembled bountiful supermarkets. For people of our generation, who grew up during a time of severe medicine shortages, this phenomenon of pharmaceutical abundance and accessibility was an inexplicable miracle.

Scientific Novelty or Uncomfortable Heuristics

We were well aware that the social relevance of the topic was a significant advantage, but we also understood that this path would come with considerable challenges. At the time, we were not thinking about political obstacles but rather about the scientific difficulties. It was uncharted research territory, and we had the opportunity to be its first pioneers. Naturally, this meant greater burdens and responsibilities.

We realized that studying the history of the pharmaceutical market would require innovative methods of analysis and sources, methods that were not typically within the historian's toolkit. Another concern was of a

[1] Archive of the Ministry of Health of the Russian Federation. Fund Ministry of Health of the Russian Federation. Opis' 1. Delo 321. List 60.
[2] Archive of the Ministry of Health of the Russian Federation. Fund Ministry of Health of the Russian Federation. Opis' 1. Delo 846. List 3.
[3] Archive of the Ministry of Health of the Russian Federation. Fund Ministry of Health of the Russian Federation. Opis' 1. Delo 524. List 71.

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different nature: the entire history of the Russian pharmaceutical industry falls within the timeline of our own lifetimes. This lack of a customary century-long distance from the object of our study made it difficult to ensure impartiality, as it is often undermined by the self-assurance of contemporaries — "I lived through it, and I remember…"

Finally, we were preparing to write about living individuals, many of whom were convinced of their own fundamental inscrutability. This meant we could expect a resistant reading of our work. Nevertheless, we decided to proceed, albeit with caution.

Object and Subject: What We Study

At the outset, our ambitions were modest: we planned to reconstruct the emergence of private pharmaceutical businesses in Russia and analyze their social image. This seemed like a feasible research goal. However, we could not remain in our "comfort zone" for long and eventually expanded our focus to the study of the pharmaceutical market.

The market is a broader domain than business. It encompasses the state as a key player, as well as professional experts — doctors, pharmacists, sociologists, economists — and many individuals who were not players themselves but supported the game. Moreover, the Russian pharmaceutical market is not a singular entity but a collection of regional, national, and sectoral markets.

What is most intriguing about this domain is that a market implies multichannel interactions. As a result, we had to delve into the political and economic intricacies of post-Soviet Russia. This was a genuine exploration, as it was impossible to situate our topic within any conventional framework established by other historians. In essence, we faced a task akin to a problem in mathematical logic: defining the unknown through the unknown.

Historiography: The State of the Research Field

Pharma surrounded us; it affected the lives of all Russians, our friends worked in this market, and Russian politicians and media repeatedly spoke of the dangers of dependency on Western pharmaceutical giants and the need for currency substitution (later termed import substitution [4]). Yet, we knew virtually nothing about the pharmaceutical market, and none of our colleagues could explain when or how this abundance emerged [5]. There was no way to uncover how it all worked.

The materials we found in newspapers and magazines offered little insight. They were either exposés of "greedy drug merchants" or representations of a social mission to save humanity. In terms of historical accounts, all we could locate were a handful of memoirs written by Russian pharmaceutical entrepreneurs [2–5] and an English-language book by Olga Zvonareva, a scholar from Tomsk, which she developed as part of her PhD in the Netherlands [6].

Testing the philosophical theory of socio-technical imaginaries by Sheila Jasanoff on Russian material, Zvonareva argued that, as in many post-socialist countries, the democratization of the 1990s freed Soviet pharmaceutical production from state control, enabling it to become a fully-fledged, apolitical private business. I will say upfront that our research led us to different conclusions: the reality was far more complex. The absence of state investment and the liberalization of prices nearly destroyed the Soviet Union's industrial legacy. Against this backdrop, imports began to supply the country with medicines.

Russian factories were unprofitable, delayed salary payments, and sent employees on indefinite leaves. The production of pharmaceutical substances, in particular, could not withstand competition and was repurposed or abandoned entirely. Even today, efforts to revive substance production to Soviet-era levels in Russia remain unsuccessful.

"In this book,— Zvonareva promised in her introduction,— I analyze how political culture shapes the rules, goals, and trajectories of pharmaceutical innovation, which simultaneously describe and prescribe Russia's national future" [6, p. 29]. She linked pharmaceutical production to social aspirations, political projects, and nation-building in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia.

Her chosen approach emphasized technologies and pharmaceutical production as outcomes of social ("civic epistemologies" in Jasanoff's terminology) and political agreements and "imaginaries". This focus shaped her analysis, providing a foundation for understanding the broader implications of pharmaceutical innovation within its cultural and political context.

Through the Lens of the Political Sphere

Viewing the pharmaceutical sector through the prism of politics seems fruitful, yet even for the "turbulent nineties," the claim of a clear separation between business and power is questionable. For the 2000s and 2010s — a period defined by new political, biomedical, and economic realities — this assertion becomes entirely untenable. During this time, the pharmaceutical business and political power became deeply intertwined, forming hybrid alliances, including familial ones.

To capture this complexity, Russian sociologists monitoring the market's evolution employed flexible explanatory models. For example, the oft-cited corruption in post-socialist countries was interpreted not in moral or legal terms but as a form of state capture by specific business groups [7]. Bribery enabled these groups to rewrite market rules to their advantage. Simultaneously, these researchers observed how the state infiltrated businesses, exerting control over companies, including through mechanisms such as "golden shares".

Summarizing the state of the field, it must be acknowledged that a comprehensive historical account of the Russian pharmaceutical market has yet to be developed. The sole existing historical study fragments the market, confines it to a single decade, and, most critical-

[4] Archive of the Ministry of Health of the Russian Federation. Fund Ministry of Health of the Russian Federation. Opis' 1. Delo 484. List 106.

[5] We described global discussions about the social role of Big Pharma in the article [1].

ly, normalizes it — presenting it as a rational, constructivist project. In contrast, memoir literature portrays the Russian pharmaceutical market as highly chaotic and scarcely comprehensible to outsiders.

These extremes raise doubts for us: doubts about the justification for exoticizing Russian pharma and about the explanatory power of universal theory. We resolved to develop so-called "middle-range theories" based on source analysis, which could eventually lead to a reassessment of the "grand" theory of socio-technical imaginaries.

Resource Base: The Informational Foundation of the Study

Through searches in informational resources and meetings with representatives of the pharmaceutical market, we created three broad groups of sources for our research.

Ego-Documents. Our understanding of the market's structure began with personal conversations with representatives of the pharmaceutical business. Over four years, we conducted 57 interviews with various stakeholders: owners, top managers, and regular employees of Russian and foreign companies; medical representatives; employees of pharmacies; leaders and staff of information, marketing, and analytical firms; representatives of various associations and unions; officials from different agencies; and economic analysts.

Most of these conversations were recorded and took the form of semi-structured interviews, designed more as memory provocations. Typically, they lasted about 1.5 hours, sometimes exceeding three hours and divided into two sessions. Additionally, we conducted roughly the same number of brief or written interviews to clarify specific issues with focus groups — for example, individuals knowledgeable about tenders or those involved in developing the 2006 Additional Drug Provision (DLO) program.

We learned through experience that the most challenging part of interviewing was securing agreement to participate. Without the help of insider guides who introduced us, convinced potential informants, and vouched for our respectful use of their statements, we would not have succeeded. At this stage, we actively adopted sociological interview practices (qualitative sociology), including ethical protocols.

Ultimately, we agreed with our informants on anonymous citation and preliminary review of transcribed interviews and drafts of our articles and book. We supplemented these adopted norms with our own innovations. One particularly effective strategy was sharing our articles and document drafts with informants for review. This not only stimulated their memory but also encouraged their engagement. Some became active co-creators of our research narratives, revisiting their interviews and our texts through follow-up phone calls and emails.

However, we also encountered deliberate reticence from some interlocutors, as well as instances of memory distortion.

Publications in Periodicals. In the 1990s, Russian pharma was primarily written about by journalists from business publications and tabloid press. These writings were filled with advertising and exposés. Following the lead of British, American, French, and German authors, Russian journalists uncovered fraud in clinical drug trials, criticized inflated prices, reported on bribery among government officials, and decried aggressive pharmaceutical advertising.

Two major media monitoring agencies, Medialogia and Integrum, aggregated such social messages and even transformed them into charts and statistics. Their data allows one to track the rise and fall of certain topics and the balance of negative and positive sentiments. Studying this data led us to conclude that media outlets serve as a distorted mirror of the pharmaceutical market. The industry was overly populated with biased journalists, advertising narratives, competitive statements, and deliberate misinformation. While this material is useful for understanding what contemporaries read and knew about the pharmaceutical market, it also reveals why public distrust of the pharmaceutical business grew.

In the 2000s and 2010s, the market experienced rapid growth, drawing increased political and scientific attention. This period saw a boom in economic, marketing, and sociological publications. Most of these studies were applied in nature, aimed at regulators and pharmaceutical company managers. Many were commissioned works, with the results remaining the property of their sponsors.

Authors in professional journals included representatives of economic sociology, behavioral economics, and marketers who branched off from these disciplines. These experts analyzed regional and sectoral markets, describing their characteristics through data and treating them as economic and social phenomena — as networks, institutions, and cultures. Typically, the purpose of these publications was to provide navigation tools for the risky terrain of the Russian economy.

For historians, the fields of sociology and economic market theory are challenging to master — encompassing pricing mechanisms, economic models, state interactions, neo-institutionalism with its transactional costs, and more. However, these disciplines proved invaluable in decoding archival records and administrative documentation from the Ministry of Health.

Administrative Documents. Historians universally enjoy working in archives, where they feel at ease. Our research drew upon three archival collections. The first was the administrative records of the Research Institute of Pharmacy, housed in the State Archive of Scientific and Technical Documentation (Moscow). During the period of our study, this institute was involved not only in calculating the pharmaceutical needs of the USSR and later Russia, forecasting orders and finances, but also in developing methods to transition the network of pharmacy institutions to self-financing operations.

The second collection was located in the State Archive of the Russian Federation, which holds the records of the USSR/Russian Ministry of Labor. This ministry oversaw the distribution of medications as part of humanitarian aid to former Soviet countries during the 1990s.

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Lastly, in the archive of the Ministry of Health, we uncovered a wide variety of documents that captured the voices of all participants in the pharmaceutical market. These included protocols discussing state policies on drug provision, proposals from foreign companies to establish joint ventures, demands from international firms for the Russian government to settle its debts, and numerous letters from impoverished patients who either could not access medicines or found them prohibitively expensive. The archive also revealed disputes between regional and central authorities regarding the health impacts of environmental disasters, as well as traces of competitive struggles between government agencies and private companies.

To interpret these documents and grasp the financial decisions and conflicts they depicted, we relied on not only publications but also live consultations with experts. Economists such as S. V. Shishkin and M. Blunt, sociologists like K. I. Golovshchinsky, and marketers including O. Feldman provided invaluable insights.

Methodology, or Research Approaches

In the interest of historical narrative, we create an interdisciplinary bricolage of approaches and methods. Using the analytical tools of historical science, we reconstruct the history of the emergence, structure, and chronology of the pharmaceutical market within a broad and still unconventional context. This is the history of a country that lacked experience in market economics and market relations, one that rapidly deconstructed the socialist political system and conducted avant-garde social engineering (in the language of the time, the building of a democratic society and liberal state). Politicians viewed the market as a panacea for Sovietism: with privatization, the dismantling of the planned economy, and the rise of private property, the Soviet Union could not be revived. Thus, we are interested in how these political projects influenced the configuration and rules of the pharmaceutical market and how the market itself impacted the country and its free and constrained choices.

In this regard, we follow the theory of socio-technological imagination. However, our approach does not conform to the universalist dichotomy inherent in its followers — "state vs business". The post-Soviet state did not see itself as a unified entity. Its parts fought against each other for power and the scarce resources available. The business sector, too, was hybrid: it involved individuals with Soviet party experience, military and academic careers, and reformers — deconstructors of Sovietism — not because of their past identities, but sometimes in spite of their own beliefs. The paradoxes do not end there. The ministry, as part of the state apparatus, was tasked with carrying out its own "de-statization," meaning transferring its resources to business structures. Yet, at the same time, it sought to compensate for the reduction in resources by strengthening administrative control and delegating responsibility for pharmaceutical provision to regional authorities. It seems that government officials also saw themselves as "new Russians," i. e., businessmen who needed to quickly earn money using budgetary funds, yet preferably avoid imprisonment. Thus, we work with sociological concepts of polyagency and the concept of the market, which is constructed during the consolidation of political and state power [8]. In this context, business and the state jointly form a market society.

Another limitation of large-scale theories is their area-focused approach, which seeks correlations between local political culture and local technological innovations. By studying the pharmaceutical market as a whole, rather than just its segment in the form of the local industry, we immediately find ourselves beyond the purely "Russian" context. Many pharmaceutical firms have a shareholder structure, decentralized localization, transnational management, and interests "above states". In Russia, there were representations of almost all the world's pharmaceutical giants, each pursuing their own political agendas. In this situation, it was not the general political culture, but rather the specific conditions of doing business in Russia, that made them "Russian."

Goal and Objectives, or The Main Idea and Research Questions

The main idea is to deconstruct the knowledge of the past Russian pharmaceutical market (to break through the distortions of state ideologies, journalistic fabrications, advertising, marketing manipulations, the self-sacralization of market players, the heroization of commemorative texts, and the concealment of tragedies).

Visually, the pharmaceutical market can be imagined as a poker game in a casino with a dealer. Everyone wants to deceive each other and take the winnings. The longer they play, the higher the stakes and the more skillful the players become. Periodically, someone loses and leaves the table, and others take their place. The dealer, however, is always a representative of the state, playing a no-lose game using budgetary money — that is, the money of those who are not at the table, those who will bear the losses but receive nothing from the winnings. This invisible, but always vocalized, participant in the market is referred to by all the players as either "the population" or "the consumers." While playing, those at the table create illusions for each other and the audience, convinced that no one but them will understand the unwritten rules of their game. They desire secrecy and claim a fundamental unknowability.

This infernal game has been ongoing for thirty years, though it does not exclude the presence of good intentions. Can it be relatively honest? Yes, but only if all participants adhere to prohibitions on fraud, uphold this order, and, most importantly, open the eyes of the population. And this assumes that the population will want to open its eyes, as it has grown accustomed to a state of blindness and accompaniment.

This intention prompts us to formulate the following objectives:

1. Before constructing the narrative of events concerning the history of the Russian pharmaceutical market, it is necessary to investigate the specifics of the production of statements about it — who spoke, who appropriated expert or social functions, what was the imperative of their messages,

how they were transmitted, through which media, and what has been preserved in collective memory and archives.
2. Based on archival documents and journal publications, reconstruct the constructivist projects of Russian reformers in the creation and regulation of the pharmaceutical market, identifying market participants, emerging networks, and institutions (norms, rules, agreements).
3. Using interviews and other sources, create generational portraits of Russian pharmaceutical businessmen, comparing media (synchronous) and commemorative (diachronic) images.

We hope that such reconstructions, analytical observations, and ethnographic sketches will allow us to present the market in a multidimensional way: as a locality (the global pharmaceutical market and "Russian specificity"), as consumer demand ("on market demand": what determined the demand for medicines and their accessibility), and as a culture (the established "market relations", "market consciousness").

What is the advantage or potential contribution of medical historians to the study of the Russian pharmaceutical market? We have chosen the position behind the dealer, and using the full range of collected documents, memoir accounts, and synchronous statements, we have obtained an audio-video recording spanning thirty years. This camera not only captured the card table, but also the pockets, legs, and hands of the players, their body language. Our historical analysis is akin to a storyboard of this video, zooming in on frames, and watching the footage in slow motion. Thanks to this, we gained the ability to observe what the officials, businessmen, their managers, medical representatives, as well as journalists, sociologists, and economists of that time did, what they did not want to do, or what they did not do, what they knew about medicine consumers, and how they reacted to their troubles. This approach reveals distortions, camouflage, retouching, and the limits of players' competences, along with the dynamics of these boundaries. And since this "casino" housed the tables of other markets, and the work of the entire establishment was influenced by the global economy and Big Pharma, we were able to see not just the sociology of a specific market or its economic model, but the history of the pharmaceutical market intertwined with the history of Russia and the history of the global economy.

Practical Significance, or Social Responsibility

All participants in this market discuss the special social importance of this space, justifying their privileges, characteristics, and limitations through it [9]. Upon closer examination, this significance breaks down into several components: the ideological responsibility of the government for ensuring access to medicines, patient-oriented business practices, protection of consumer rights, and marketing research of consumer interests and behavior. Thus, consumers of medicines are studied, counted, protected, and their interests are formulated. Yet, they either do not know or know strange things about their "benefactors." The asymmetry of information in the pharmaceutical market (its opacity for consumers and transparency for regulators) does not contribute to open, honest relationships between the players of the Russian pharmaceutical market and the end consumers — hundreds of millions of Russian medicine buyers and patients. The pharmaceutical business is primarily interested in people of power, their intentions, and decisions, followed by doctors and scientific discoveries, and pharmacies. In consulting analyses, consumers appear in the form of charts and tables, a kind of averaged quantity, an indicator in economic formulas. For regulators, consumers are viewed as an object of social policy, an argument for expanding the state's presence in the market and its interventions in business (*protection of national health, protection from the threats of drug import dependence*, etc.).

We aim to contribute to the development of a smart, responsible medicine consumer in Russia. Awareness is a necessary prerequisite for responsibility. A poorly or incorrectly informed consumer cannot be a full partner in market relations; they are relegated to the realm of market infantilism, subject to paternalistic control. By revealing the structure of this market to our readers, we make them "adults" and responsible for their decisions, and thereby contribute to the harmonization of the relationship between the pharmaceutical market and its consumers.

First Findings

The chosen optics allowed for the following observations regarding the internal chronology of the Russian pharmaceutical market. We divided the thirty-year period under study into two almost equal segments.

1990s–2005: The wild nineties in the history of the pharmaceutical market are not the same as in the political and social history of the country. They are related but not synchronized. Under the pressure of external factors and in line with the expectations of their compatriots, Russian politicians conducted the deconstruction of "Sovietism": the privatization of state-owned property, the transformation of national values into commodities, the de-monopolization of the economy, and the dream of a market society. Frequent changes in political influence groups within Yeltsin's government and the confrontation between them and the President weakened the vertical power structure, centralization, and were accompanied by rapid changes in the executive branch (including ministers of health), creating fertile ground for national and local autonomies. Against this backdrop, economic decline, the rise of criminal power, and local nationalisms occurred, revealing disparities in the economic conditions of the regions.

The pharmaceutical market emerged as a result of a political decision — a rejection of the socialist command-and-distribution system in favor of a self-regulating market with free prices. In a time of political crisis and acute resource shortages, this decision led to asymmetry: it caused high drug prices and their inaccessibility for consumers, which, as a result, led to shortages, making the sector attractive for aspiring Russian entrepreneurs and Big Pharma.

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In the newly opened market space, everything developed rapidly: a shortage of drugs in pharmacies, initially a sharp demand followed by a decline in demand for the now exorbitantly priced drugs on one hand, and the bankruptcy or repurposing of former Soviet pharmaceutical manufacturers, transforming them into private property, and the growing revenues of pharmaceutical distributors on the other. Everyone was learning and everyone was taking risks: the government attempted to regulate the market experimentally, making decisions that hurt millions of Russians; former Soviet organizers of drug supply learned to run private businesses without government funding and argue with ministers; Western companies learned to adapt to Russian realities and navigate a regulated pharmaceutical business in the context of an unregulated market; Russian doctors learned the basics of marketing, logistics, and market relations; while ordinary Russians tried to live without medicine, leading to an increase in excess mortality, or sought ways to obtain drugs in the new economic conditions.

Unlike other Russian markets, the pharmaceutical sector seemed to be safer for business due to the necessity of specialized knowledge and competencies. It was profitable, but typically, criminals did not venture into it. It quickly became "import-dependent," both in terms of market technologies and drug production. The non-market Soviet society was naively infantile, which created particular opportunities for Big Pharma. However, the "natives" quickly learned from the newcomers, owing to the high level of education (medical, sociological, linguistic, and later economic) of Russians who joined the service of foreign pharmaceutical companies. The decline in Russian production and the increase in imports led to the outflow of Russian capital abroad, as well as forced investments in foreign production.

Currency and import dependency in drug supply became one of the contributing factors to the 1998 financial crisis. This crisis became a pivotal moment in Russian politics and was particularly hard on consumers, who once again faced a shortage of medicines. However, the default did not significantly alter the pharmaceutical market. Those who had managed to establish strong distribution infrastructure and/or transnational capital remained and strengthened their positions. This was the period of consolidation among distributors, capital mergers, and the formation of commercial alliances.

2005–2010s: The "Fat Noughties" and the subsequent reindustrialization were the results of global macroeconomic processes and the stabilization of political (and, along with it, executive) power in Russia. The unprecedented rise in energy resource prices (oil, gas) and the development of new deposits brought enormous revenue into the Russian budget and resource businesses. The government under Vladimir Putin was able to more freely define political strategies and move toward long-term projects. This aligned with the expectations of a stable future for all pharmaceutical market players, including drug consumers. In the competition for victory and the implementation of social programs, both the government and the private sector pushed for an increased state presence in the pharmaceutical market. The government went along with this, seemingly reluctantly, and with the ideology of national health protection, which increasingly focused on national security. Its interpretation included protection against dependency threats. The most significant event for the pharmaceutical market in this decade was the 2005 Additional Drug Provision (DLO) program. The state strengthened its market presence through regulatory mechanisms and by merging governmental and business structures. The most important event was the adoption of the state program "Pharma 2020", which proclaimed a policy of pharmaceutical independence for Russia and industrial paternalism.

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