kultura

APRIL 1/2007

# Spaces of Creativity: Excursions into the Realm of Leisure in Russia

Guest editor: Joachim Otto Habeck (Halle/Saale)



*kultura*. Russian cultural review is published under the supervision of
Professor Wolfgang Eichwede,
director of the Research Centre for East European Studies at Bremen University.
Editorial board: Hartmute Trepper M.A., Dr. Isabelle de Keghel (until June 2006), Guest Editors
Technical editor: Matthias Neumann

Forschungsstelle Osteuropa | Publikationsreferat | Klagenfurter Str. 3 | 28359 Bremen
tel. +49 421 218-3302 or -3257 | fax +49 421 218-3269
mailto: *fsopr@uni-bremen.de* | Internet: *www.forschungsstelle-osteuropa.de*

## editorial

"Work" has ceased to possess the central social importance which it enjoyed under the Soviet regime. Over the last two decades, "leisure" has acquired an ever greater significance in Russian society; at the same time, the range of pursuits has become more varied. This issue of *kultura* can only present a small and somewhat arbitrary selection of the many activities and spaces for leisure.

One of the themes of the issue is the dacha, the "typically Russian" combination of summerhouse and small garden. Both Melissa Caldwell and Ilka Borchardt stress its association with gardening and relaxation, healthy eating and well-being, retreat into the company of family and friends, and an almost philosophical serenity. Visits to the dacha are both materially and spiritually beneficial. Life goes at an easy pace; the only really decisive rhythm is that set by nature – that of planting and harvesting.

The other two pieces describe pastimes which follow a different logic. They are connected by their common aspects of play and the creation of a particular scenario. This is the case both for the different types of "militarian" role-playing (Barchunova and Beletskaia) and the musical shows, which are rehearsed and performed in the Houses of Culture (Habeck). Familial intimacy is here replaced by solidarity among the motley crew of participants, whether this be in the form of a faithful team of "combatants" or a public artistic performance.

All the texts address the question of the extent to which these spaces for leisure are also spaces of freedom – that is, whether those involved try to avoid social controls and public norms, or instead subordinate themselves to them. At first it seems that "decent behavior" is more important in the House of Culture than in the summerhouse. Nevertheless, life on the dacha is also molded by romanticized depictions in the media and advertising, which give tips on how one can be even happier in one's garden.

Leisure pursuits are therefore in very different ways subject to old and new forms of ideological influence, by which is understood both post-soviet commercialization and the resurgent emphasis on patriotism. Throughout the world it seems that the borders between the civil and the military domains, between virtual identities and "real" role-playing games are blurring. As the two photographs show, young people in Novosibirsk as well as elsewhere enjoy slipping on uniforms during their free time. In contrast, the scenes at the dacha promise an "earthly" happiness – an unadventurous but for that reason healthy and peaceful life. Perhaps this contrast can be taken as a symbol of the idealized version of Russian society: the outward display of strength and heroism is combined with an inward image of fertility, peace and family values.

*From the German by Christopher Gilley*

ABOUT THE GUEST EDITOR:
Joachim Otto Habeck, PhD, is the Co-ordinator of the Siberian Studies Centre at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle (Saale), Germany. His recent publications deal with land use and identity in the Far North of Russia, notably on the practice and image of reindeer herding among the Komi. Currently he is doing research on cultural institutions in Russia, popular notions of culture, leisure activities and so-called subcultures. For this purpose he has conducted fieldwork in the city and region of Novosibirsk.

excursion

# Living the Good Life: The Work of Leisure in Russia's Dacha Culture

*Melissa L. Caldwell*

*In Russia, summer cottages in the countryside are spaces of recreation and leisure for urbanites. They are also sites of intensive labor, as residents invest considerable time and energy into gardening and repairs. Yet Russians see this hard work as leisure because it is done for their personal benefit, rather than for the benefit of the state or an employer, and because these activities enable them to socialize with friends and relatives.*

In Russia, the end of late spring and beginning of summer are marked by a series of rituals. High school students in their best clothes and adorned with sashes and bells throng public streets and parks to celebrate "Last Bell," as graduation is called. Sidewalk cafés, beer gardens, and barbecue stands spring up along streets and tucked away in alleys and forested parks. Tour agencies shift into high advertising gear to tempt winter-weary citizens with relaxing vacations to sunny, warm beach destinations. Perhaps most visibly, workplaces, apartment buildings, and public spaces empty as urban Russians from all walks of life engage in a mass exodus from the city. In densely populated urban centers like Moscow, a city with a population of more than 12 million, this summer exodus creates a noticeable void, as empty spaces appear in parking lots, public transportation, restaurants, shops, and neighborhood playgrounds. When urban centers empty, it is Russia's countryside that fills, as urbanites head to health spas, summer camps, and campgrounds.

Perhaps the most significant rural destination for summertime migrants, however, is the *dacha*, or summer cottage. Technically the term "dacha" refers to the spacious and luxurious summer homes of Russia's elites, such as the houses depicted in such films as *Dr. Zhivago* and *Burnt by the Sun*, as well as the expansive, lavishly furnished, and tightly guarded compounds of Russia's new political, business, and cultural tycoons. The summer cottages inhabited by ordinary Russians, by contrast, are more modest structures that generally consist of a small building with one or two tiny rooms that double as living and sleeping space, and a separate kitchen that typically has room only for a small table and set of chairs and a hotplate for cooking. Although most of these structures have electricity, indoor plumbing is a rarity. In most cases, cold running water is provided only through an outdoor spigot in the yard. Despite the more modest means of these summer homes, however, most Russians refer to them also as "dachas," a usage that signifies that themes of leisure and recreation are not exclusive to Russia's elite but are a more general quality associated with summer cottages.

## Collective Niches for Private Recreation

Dachas were already established as part of the summer culture of Russian elites by the nineteenth century. During the Soviet period, summer cottages became incorporated into the summer practices of ordinary citizens, not only in Russia but across the Soviet Union. Soviet authorities recognized the value of summer cottages for providing healthful leisure as well as physical and mental rejuvenation to tired workers. As part of the state's project of building a strong workforce, Soviet authorities set aside plots of land that ordinary Russians could use to build a small cottage and plant a small garden. Under the Soviet system of communal ownership, individual Russians could not own these plots of land themselves; rather, the state held the land in trust for its citizens, and citizens were awarded use rights to the land. Because these plots were assigned

excursion

through citizens' employers or through party membership, residents within dacha communities generally belonged to the same profession or workplace. Not all Russians were awarded plots of land on which to build a dacha, however. People without personal plots either visited friends and relatives who did have access to a plot, or they rented a cottage or room with access to a small section of the owner's garden. Today, changes in Russia's property laws have enabled citizens to buy these plots of land directly from the state.

Dachas are organized into communities ranging in size from fewer than one hundred cottages to more than five hundred cottages. Within these communities, individual dacha plots are arranged along inner paths and roads, with flower beds, hedges, and small fences delineating property lines between neighbors. Externally, high walls demarcate the boundaries of dacha communities and offer protection from vandals. Most dacha communities are located near forests, meadows, or a body of water. The most desirable communities enjoy the benefits of all three types of natural resources. *Dachniki*, as dacha residents are known, value these natural resources for such activities as mushroom and berry picking, hiking, swimming, sunbathing, and fishing.

Throughout their history in Russia, dachas have been valued as sites of leisure and recreation. During the Soviet period, many dacha communities included public facilities such as sports fields and spaces for cultural activities like films or concerts. Dachniki have also cleared land in the fields and forests outside their dachas and established volleyball courts and half-sized soccer

*Neighbors share tips on growing a beautiful flower garden.*


fields. Young adults gather with their friends to sing and eat around campfires that they build in the woods and along riverbanks, and groups of relatives, friends, and visitors of all ages enjoy leisurely strolls through the woods. For those lucky enough to enjoy a summertime birthday, the dacha becomes the preferred setting for festive celebrations that last throughout the day and long into the night. Most recently, the recreational aspects of dacha living have encouraged the growth of other, more recognizably leisurely pursuits. The plots of land on which dachas are situated are gradually being transformed into spaces for barbecue grills, lawn chairs, croquet wickets, and even one-hole golf courses.

### Fruits of Hard Labor

Perhaps even more important than these recreational activities, however, are the gardens that dachniki cultivate at their cottages. Although dacha gardens are relatively small, they are intensively farmed with a wide variety of plants and vegetables: cucumbers, tomatoes, radishes, squash, lettuce, onions, herbs, berry bushes, and fruit trees. During the periodic food shortages of the Soviet period, dacha gardens acquired significance as supplemental food sources. As Russia's food supply has stabilized in the post-Soviet period, the value of gardens has shifted. Although Russians continue to value the foods that they grow themselves as being healthier than foods bought in stores and markets, in recent years many dachniki have begun transforming their gardens into the beautifully manicured lawns and flower gardens that are more common in Western Europe and North America.

Regardless of the particular style of individual dacha gardens, it is safe to say that Russia has a national obsession with gardening. Seeds, fertilizer, planting techniques, and gardening implements are regular topics of conversation among friends and strangers alike. Visits to people's dachas and apartments frequently necessitate a "show and tell" session in which the host and hostess share photographs of their gardens and offer samplings of jams, pickled vegetables, and dried herbs and mushrooms made from foods taken from their gardens and the nearby forests. In recent years, the growth of Russia's economy has perhaps been most visible in the extent to which gardening has acquired value as a prime commercial entity. Shopping complexes are filled with shops and stalls selling tools, fertilizer, seeds, lawn mowers, lawn furniture, fireplaces, barbecue grills, and biotoilets. Commuters on the trams and minibuses have to fight for space with people carrying seedlings, trees, and weed whackers. Newspaper stands and bookstores are filled with magazines, papers, and books devoted to vegetable gardens, flower gardens, natural foods and healthy eating, greenhouse and patio design, and tips for holistic living.

Dacha living is not exclusively a summertime activity, however, but is in fact a year-round preoccupation. Beginning in late winter, Russians studiously pore over seed catalogs and magazines devoted to the latest gardening tips, consumer reports on lawn tools and equipment, recipes for using garden produce, and the all-important farmer's almanac with predictions about the upcoming seasonal cycles for planting and harvesting. In early spring, stores begin stocking seedlings, fertilizer, building materials for cottage renovations, and cottage-specific furniture and home decorations. As soon as the snows have melted and dacha communities are accessible, dachniki begin their weekend pilgrimages to open up their cottages and begin planting. Summer renters firm up their arrangements to lease a room, an entire cottage, or even just a garden patch. By May, dachniki have started gardening and cottage renovations in earnest, and they con-

excursion

*Making jams and pickles is a family affair in this dacha kitchen.*
© ML Caldwell

tinue these activities until September when their children and grandchildren return to school and autumn is beginning.

### Dacha Life vs City Life

Ultimately, what dachas provide for Russians is an escape from the stresses of their everyday lives. Urbanites who live in cramped, noisy apartments claim that they sleep better in the countryside where they awaken naturally to the sounds of bird calls. Dachniki claim that the physical ailments that they suffer in the city – high blood pressure, headaches, and chest pains – disappear when they arrive at their dachas. Foods that are gathered and eaten at the dacha are believed to be healthier than the foods available in the city, and children are encouraged to eat fresh fruits and vegetables taken directly from the earth, without being washed. At the same time, dachas are sites of a more natural and spontaneous sociality where neighbors feel free to drop in unexpectedly for a cup of tea and a chat, children play freely among the cottages, and friends and relatives can sit up talking and eating until the early hours of the morning.

This emphasis on dachas as sites of healthful recreational activity disguises the extent to which dachas are places of hard work. The tasks of gardening and cottage maintenance involve tremendous amounts of time and physical exertion. At the same time, the material and physical costs of maintaining a dacha and garden often exceed the expense of purchasing fresh produce in a store, taking a vacation, or even hiring repairmen for cottage maintenance and renovation projects. Despite these factors, it is not uncommon for dachniki to spend their weekends and vacations working in their gardens and getting no more than a few hours of sleep every night. Yet despite the hard and rigorous labor of the dacha life, dachniki insist that this work is itself a form

of leisure. For some, the rhythmic activities of planting, weeding, and harvesting offer a form of meditation in which they concentrate solely on the task at hand and forget about the responsibilities and problems awaiting them at work. For others, engaging with nature is a spiritual activity that brings them in harmony with the earth and a higher being.

### Do What You Want – For Your Own Benefit

Hence work and leisure acquire new significance when considered through the lens of the Russian dacha. For Russian dachniki the difference between labor and leisure is ultimately about the ability to control one's time and activities. For dachniki, dacha work is productive labor that benefits one's own circumstances rather than those of one's employer or the state. At the same time, dachniki own the fruits of their labor: they alone enjoy the produce and flowers they grow in their gardens and the changes they make to their cottages. Their dachas and gardens are personal, private spaces outside the reach of the state. Perhaps most important is the social aspect of dachas. Dachas are places that Russians share with their closest relatives and friends, not only in recreational activities, but also in the work of the dacha. Gardening and repairs become an excuse to socialize with friends and family for hours or even days at a time. Ultimately, dachas are the spaces where Russians feel a sense of freedom and empowerment. As one woman put it, it was at her dacha that she could ignore the conventions of life in the city. At the dacha she felt free to dress as she wanted, to eat what she wanted, and to do what she wanted when she wanted. It was here, where she was relaxed, that she felt most fully human and alive.

### About the Author:

Melissa L. Caldwell is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at the University of California, Santa Cruz. She has been conducting ethnographic fieldwork on food-related issues in Russia since 1995, and has written on such topics as fast food, food nationalism, culinary tourism, and organic foods. She is currently writing a book on gardening and summer cottages in contemporary Russia.

### Reading Suggestions:


- Stephen Lovell, *Summerfolk: A History of the Dacha, 1710–2000*. Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 2003.
- Jane Zavisca, "Contesting Capitalism at the Post-Soviet Dacha: The Meaning of Food Cultivation for Urban Russians." *Slavic Review*, 2003, 62(4):786–810.


### *Anastasiitsy* – Gardeners as Saviors (Ilka Borchardt)

The middle of the 1990s saw the appearance of the *Anastasiitsy* (i.e. the followers of Anastasia) movement in Russia. They were inspired by the books of Vladimir Megre, a businessman from Novosibirsk. In the eight volumes published so far, Megre expounds the ideas of Anastasia, a recluse who lives in tune with nature deep in the Taiga. Megre claims to have met her on a boat trip on the Ob' north of Novosibirsk.

In this ideology Megre mixes Russian folklore and history with elements from the world religions and specific instructions dealing with, amongst others, education, health and gardening. His success is not confined to Russia – the books have so far been translated into 16 languages, all of them with high print runs. Throughout the world there are meetings of readers' clubs, internet forums, exchange

excursion

and trade of the natural recommended products and attempts to set up "Anastasia settlements".
In the books Anastasia explains through Megre her views on life, morals, work, human relationships and the necessity of treating nature with love. She is particularly devoted to the Russian dachas. According to Anastasia, the dachniki have again and again saved the world from the apocalypse through their "holy work" because they contribute to "humankind's healing encounter with the earth".
A number of years ago the Russian Orthodox Church condemned the "Anastasia cult" to be a totalitarian sect. However, its continued popularity has a number of reasons: this ideology raises a common pastime to a source of positive identity; allotment holders become "saviours of the world". The emphasis on the environment and subsistence offers a way out from the helplessness resulting from global, economic and ecological dangers. Moreover, it touches on concrete, daily problems: the yearning to live in a space which one has created oneself.
Or, to use Anastasia's terms: two acres of land owned by family becomes a "Space of Love" (the title of the 3rd volume in the series). On it the "Knowledge of the Ancients" (volume 6) is taught and through the horticultural relationship to nature a consciousness of "Creation" (volume 4) is conveyed. This solidarity with nature acquires a semi-religious, spiritual character through the use of specific plants, the performance of rituals during cultivation and its everyday cycle. Each individual deed should enable the transformation of the earth into a blossoming garden and give the opportunity to find one's own way into paradise. The ideas espoused by Megre's Anastasia successfully combine the search for salvation with modern reality and historical experience. In this way, they offer a detailed code of practice for personal well-being – by all means a profitable recipe for success.
*Translated from the German by Christopher Gilley*

Anastasia web sites: *http://www.anastasia.ca/; http://www.spaceoflove.com*

sketch

## Seasonal Leisure Spaces: Dachas in Western Siberia

*Ilka Borchardt*

The middle of September, 2000: the bus from Akademgorodok/Novosibirsk, traveling in the direction of the settlement Novyi Poselok, was occupied almost exclusively by pensioners with buckets, baskets and military rucksacks. They were dressed in sports suits and army surplus uniforms. The young people who in summer had normally filled up the bus were absent. At this time of the year, the last valuables and cans of food from the garden plots were being taken to the flats in the city, and the cottages were being made ready for the winter. Only a few people remained there for the night. The nights had become noticeably cooler and the little houses often required several hours each day to heat. "The Indian summer [in Russian: crone's summer] is over, but the crones have stayed" (*bab'e leto proshlo, a baby ostalis'*). This play on words earned one passenger, talking to the woman next to him, the approving laughter of all those within earshot.
The reason for my numerous journeys to Novyi Poselok was an ethnographic field study of the gender-specific division of work on the dachas – the small garden plots run by city dwellers. I was looking for evidence that work in the allot-

sketch

ments is not just a burden. There was reason to suppose that the dachas were not merely sources of food in times of economic hardship, but also possessed a greater social meaning and provided their owners with self-confidence and a positive identity. My impression was that in particular older women (pensioners) gained a feeling of pride and self-esteem from this activity. This pride has been experienced by everyone who has ever visited a Russian family and been told over the meal that this jam or that pickled vegetable had been grown in the family's own garden.

The dachas are summer houses or gardens in a village or rural settlement which are run by people from the cities. The basic characteristic of this horticulture is that it is amateur. It is not a profession, but rather a hobby. Even when the *dachniki* (as the plot holders are known) supplement their income by selling their crops, their activity retains above all the character of a hobby. This is underlined by the seasonality of the dacha life and the fact that the dachniki spend the winter in the city. Work in the garden is described in the language of leisure, as "active relaxation" and a "passion".

Most *dachniki* are older women (the life expectancy of men in Siberia is below the retirement age). Above all, they dominate the transitional seasons, spring and autumn. At the weekends and during the school holidays the whole family often visits the dacha to relax. Gardening (planting, cultivation, harvesting and processing of the crop) and the repair of the cottages and fences represent the recurrent activity on the dachas. Garden work is understood as physiotherapy, a burden, relaxation and even as a spiritual act. Social interaction, such as the exchange of recipes and seed, the maintenance of neighborly relationships, walks and collecting mushrooms also belong to this. The dacha is a space with strong social controls, but also for competition and creative self-expression. Many of these aspects can also be found in German allotments …

The old man's play on words on a bus dominated by old women hints at the deeper cultural facet of the dachas. It highlighted the age and gender of the *dachniki*. Implicitly he referred to the fact that the summer retreats of the city dwellers had again and again been subject to changes in their precise composition and meaning. Despite this, they are commonly understood to be something specifically Russian which serves as a cultural constant. Though dachas are spaces which are used seasonally, they are associated with continuity – to a certain extent, they connect change and consistency. In the words of the old man, the changes are represented by the outgoing season. The plot holders, i.e. the social component of the space, embody continuity.

The constancy of the dachas as a social space also reflects the aspect of leisure space. They literally served and serve as a social space in that recreational interaction takes place within them. Today they are also a mark of social status: even when the *dachniki* are far away from these spaces, certain ways of acting, statements and pieces of knowledge reveal their passion for being a *dachnik*. This knowledge is, incidentally, not acquired from books, but rather through personal experience. Those who travel in autumn with a certain type of luggage in a particular bus are in all likelihood on their way to a dacha: he or she apparently shares the passion for gardening with the other passengers and must know the synchrony of change and continuity. This allowed the man on the bus to include the unknown women in his play on words. For this reason he can call them "crones" without reprimand because he recognizes the importance of the older women for the continuity of the social space of the dacha.

sketch

*Translated from the German by Christopher Gilley*

About the Author:
Ilka Borchardt specializes in Social and Cultural Anthropology. Her M.A. thesis is based on one-year fieldwork in Novosibirsk, focussing on genderized work and spaces in dacha settlements. Currently she participates in the graduate school "Gender in Motion" at the University of Basel (Switzerland).

portrait

## Organized Patriotism versus Spontaneous Tolerance: Militarian Games in Novosibirsk

*Tat'iana Barchunova and Nataliia Beletskaia*

*Over the last seven years, we have been conducting sociological research on youth in Novosibirsk. This work can be characterized by a continued interest in new, postsocialist, practices and their connection to past, socialist leisure occupations of young people. It was by coincidence that in 2001 we "bumped into" a particular movement that we so far had not been aware of – the role-playing games movement. This movement may be considered a local practice of the globally existing endeavor of historical reconstruction and a carnivalesque enactment of the fantasy genre.*

In what follows we want to describe a *particular* sector that has recently crystallized from the role-playing games movement. The specific feature of this sector is its *exclusive* orientation towards martial themes. In order to be clear about its character, we have decided to call it *militarian*. A special term for this scene is needed to differentiate it from the so-called martial-patriotic games *Zarnitsa* ("heat lightning") that used to be one of the forms of ideological schooling (*vospitanie*) all over the Soviet Union. This sector is also different from current forms of governmental arrangements aimed at propaganda for the military service.

Throughout the existence of the role-playing movement in Novosibirsk there were quite a lot of individuals who were interested first and foremost in *kolovushki* ("battles"), or *faiterki* (from the English word "fighter"), in other words, in role plays with a martial component, imitating so-called limited wars and duels characteristic for pre-modern society. Knights' battles and crusades figured among the most wide-spread topics emulated in such role plays. However, what is new is the emphasis on the martial component, which has become the prime purpose of the games in this sector.

In Novosibirsk this sector consists of three categories. Firstly, *strikeball* (in Japan this kind of game is called *Airsoft),* a game similar to paintball. Its prime characteristics are team spirit and solidarity, sportive competitiveness, and the use of distinctive weapons. Secondly, various groups of players re-enact duels and armed conflicts that took place in various epochs and parts of the world. By their emphasis on past (often mediaeval) events and situations, these groups stand in a neutral – or disengaged – position to mainstream society. Thirdly, there is a club called *Poteshnye polki* (which could be translated as "merry regiments" – the name actually refers to the bands of young men and children that were arranged by young tsar Peter the Great to train his own military skills. Later he converted these *live toy soldiers* into regular guards' regiments). The club emulates various motifs of Russian history;

portrait

it cultivates ideas of *Russian character* and Russian patriotism.

One might assume that people engaged in any of the three categories would have clearly xenophobic attitudes and would be aggressive nationalists. However, on the basis of our research materials we think that this assumption cannot be supported. On the contrary, the diversity of historical themes and literary motifs constitutes an antidote of its own kind which acts against xenophobia and intolerance in many cases. We do see, however, a problematic tendency in the third category, *Poteshnye polki*.

*Poteshnye polki* emerged from the kids' club *Gepards*, which existed at a school in the southern part of Novosibirsk. It was with the arrival of an adult instructor that the club attained its nationalist orientation, as is evident in its symbols, its selection of themes from Russian history, the ideological emphasis on bodily fitness and the development of a sense of public safety, or law and order. For example, the goal of one of the games was described as follows: an "acquaintance of the participants with the historical roots of Great Russia, of the history of its beginnings and its development from earliest times, the study of the sources of the Russian Soul and Russian Character".

In their games, children tend to separate themselves from the world of adults. As long as *Poteshnye Polki* remain within a social space separated from the nationalistic "games" being "played" by adult politicians, their search for national identity will remain balanced by their spontaneous tolerance and multi-ethnic constituency of the organization. However, in the case of mobilization of the club by aggressive nationalists there is a danger of conversion of militarian games into militaristic ones.

*Leisurely combat: a strikeball game near Novosibirsk, 24 October 2005.*


portrait

The militarian games scene in Novosibirsk seems to be an alternative to what is known from Soviet days as "organized" leisure. The *strikeball* community can be considered a new, genderized sport. Though the Novosibirsk *strikeball* community also contains women, *strikeball* is apparently used to reaffirm the male identity in the crisis of masculinity in Russia diagnosed by a number of gender-studies scholars. The game attracts the members of the community by modernized technical equipment and by values specific for military communities such as communitarianism, risk taking, and break from the routine of everyday life in cell apartments. The militarian games based on *historical re-enactment* are more sophisticated in terms of game scenarios. The equipment for these games is produced not by commercial companies but by the armorers' guilds within the community. The *Poteshnye Polki* group represents yet a different trend. Some of the plots used in the games of this group are based on episodes of the military history of Russia (for instance, there was a game emulating the victorious battle against the Tatars at Kulikovo Pole in 1380). The majority of the games, however, represent battles between abstract rivals.

We see the activities of *Poteshnye Polki* in the framework of the project of national identity construction, started by Peter the Great but interrupted by the subsequent so-called internationalist approach to state building, as was shown by Vera Tolz and other historians. As any other national identity project it has to be realized through the construction of the Other. What is important here is that the Other should not be constructed as a fiend that has to be physically destroyed for the sake of a homogenous societal whole. Our only hope is that *Poteshnye Polki* will remain independent of politicians who cultivate an ideology of the Other as a fiend.

About the Authors:

Tat'iana Barchunova is Associate Professor of the Philosophy Department at Novosibirsk State University. Her recent publications are based on empirical research of religious communities, and leisure practices.

Nataliia Beletskaia is consultant of the Resource Center for the Humanities at Novosibirsk State University, and expert on leisure for the Center for Creativity and Development of Youth "Kaleidoscope" in Novosibirsk.

Reading Suggestions:

- Tat'iana Barchunova, Nataliia Beletskaia, "Without fear and reproach: the role-playing games community as a challenge to mainstream culture", 2004, Sibirica, 4 (1): 116–129.
- URL strikeball community in the Novosibirsk region: *http://www.strike-ball.ru* (in Russian)

On the Role-Playing Games Movement in Russia (Hartmute Trepper)

In Russia the role-playing games movement first started appearing in Science Fiction clubs in the late 1980s. Like the singer-songwriters and the nature lovers, they were part of an-off-handedly apolitical, independent, and for that reasons socially suspect, nationwide cultural movement, which possessed a network which for the days before e-mail worked astonishingly well.

The role-playing games movement has continued to exhibit several elements of this earlier tradition. Just as the followers of the singer-songwriters from the whole country traveled to the annual

portrait

Grushinskii open-air festival on the Volga near Kuibyshev (Samara) in the 1970s and later, so too have the role players from all of Russia come together every spring since the 1990s at the SibCon (Siberian Role-Playing Convention) in Tomsk or Novosibirsk. Only the word "Convention" reveals the movement to be part of a globalized, electronically conveyed culture with versatile links across state boundaries. The internet has speeded up the creation of domestic and foreign networks at a tremendous rate.

In Russia the role players seek to achieve within their community the values of independence, self-sufficient organization, belief in one's own powers and freedom from being told what to do.* An equally high value is placed on finding an ethical basis for one's actions through game rules, which prescribe fairness and which without trust would be ineffective. Thus the community of role players is a social space, which works according to other principles than those in "real" society, and exists outside of the traditional, state-organized or commercial pastimes on offer.

In this space there are only participants and teams, no consumers; here, the individual tries to develop his or her own creative potential. Games, tournaments and mock battles are decided by the real skills and abilities of the players. Moreover, the personal experience gathered from the detailed modelling of figures from another, conflict-riven world also offers a source for self-assertion in the "real" world.

In the meantime, younger "professionals" with a decided interest in history, fantasy or martial arts have become involved in the movement as players or trainers alongside young people and students. Now the role players have to cope with social mistrust, the charge of frivolity (what uses do medieval dances have for adults?) and escapism.

In practice, the role-playing movement cannot consistently maintain the desired distance from the mainstream and its representatives – it must come to an arrangement with it. For rehearsals in winter the participants need rooms and for the ever more elaborate games, increasingly money as well. It would be interesting to find out whether, and to what extent, the players are able to use their experience to represent their interests against the "real" cultural and leisure industry.

The *strikeball* teams, who are interested in military simulation, seem to have less problems with the established institutions. This can be seen on their websites, which record partner organizations including the fire brigade and the "Fund 'Antiterror' of Veterans of the Special Units", as well as the logos of various companies. The published field-test reports of new, commercially produced weapons, written by members of the teams, could by all means be understood to be implicit advertising. It would seem that *strikeball* forms a bridge between the role-playing games community, which sees itself as independent, and the politically sanctioned, militarily nuanced tendency within the discourse on patriotism in Russian society.

* Interesting interviews on the self-image of the movement can be found in the reading tip following the article by Barchunova and Beletskaia.

*Translated from the German by Christopher Gilley*

analysis

# Enacting "Culture" and "Culturedness": Why People May or May Not Want to Spend Their Free Time in the House of Culture

*Joachim Otto Habeck*

*How the Houses of Culture fared in socialist times, and how their situation is nowadays, is seldom subject of public debate in Russia, or of social sciences research. In order to explore the changing functions and meanings of houses of culture in Russia, and more broadly, to chart current trends in local policies in the cultural sphere, researchers of the Siberian Studies Centre of the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology conducted a comparative study in five different places in Siberia in spring 2006. One of the preliminary results: the ways in which employees and visitors interpret the "mission" of the institution and houses of culture operate in everyday practice differ strongly from place to place, notwithstanding the general guidelines, the programs and the institutional framework provided by the state and its federal subjects.*

The House of Culture (*Dom kul'tury*, abbreviated henceforward as DK) used to be the key institution for cultural activities and the implementation of state cultural policies in the Soviet Union and many other socialist countries. The system of cultural institutions comprised larger and smaller variants throughout the country: the *dvorets kul'tury*, or "Palace of Culture", in big cities; the DK itself as a medium-size unit; and the *klub* as the elementary version for small settlements. Typically, in the DK so-called artistic collectives engaged in singing, dancing, theatre acting, handicrafts, etc. Through this institution, the state and all large enterprises provided a space where people could engage in joint activities during their leisure time. One might say that the Communist Party and other authorities created a controlled environment for people's leisure-time activities. Professional cultural workers were responsible for instruction and cultural event management.

The DKs did not aim at training professional artists – this was done in other institutions – but rather at promoting *kul'tura* (that is, "high culture", a hegemonic version of culture) broadly among the population. Endowed with a pedagogical and political mission, the DKs were responsible for "enlightenment", moral edification and personal cultivation. This is illustrated particularly clearly in the Russian term *kul'turno-prosvetitel'skaia rabota* ("cultural and enlightenment work"). They implemented the socialist state's attempt to "bring culture to the masses" and stimulate people's creativity. By taking part in the activities, the workers and peasants and their children were improving their "selves" and their roles as members of the socialist society.

Yet simultaneously, the members of the community, i.e. the people who lived in the area the DK was to serve, used this institution for their own particular purposes and interests. Particularly in rural areas, the building constituted an important space for social interaction beyond the family and the work collective. Thus, in addition to the top-down process of "bringing culture to the masses" there was always a bottom-up process of negotiating social cohesion and communal life within the institutional frame of the DK. Moreover, there were examples of "subversion", such as rock concerts taking place in urban DKs in the 1970s and 1980s. In other words, even though these venues constituted a *controlled* environment for people's leisure-time activities, there was some leeway for self-expression outside the conventional framework.

## Houses of Culture Re-Emerging from the "Disastrous" 1990s

The political changes of the last twenty years have gravely affected the mission of the DKs.

analysis

Some would say that the DKs represent an old and obsolete model of cultural politics. Expressions of cultural life have become much more diverse and, at the same time, more commercial in all post-socialist societies. In Russia, too, the state's influence on the cultural sphere began to decrease, and simultaneously the role of the DK came to be challenged by alternative, competing forms. It appears that especially young people (approximately of the age between 16 and 28, i.e. between the end of school and the time when they have children of their own) are no longer attracted by the activities and events of the DK. They engage in leisure activities that are commonly not covered by the DKs, such as hip-hop dancing or computer-based activities (including computer games and online chat). Their perception of the DK is one of conventional forms and unexciting activities organized in a strict manner, even though some DKs have started incorporating new activities into their programmes.

Throughout the 1990s, the DKs were in a state of deep symbolical and economic crisis. Owing to the economic hardship during the transition to the market economy, they no longer received funding sufficient even for the most elementary tasks, such as structural repairs or employee salaries. With a few exceptions, those DKs that had belonged to an enterprise were handed over to the municipality. In this process, many were closed down. In order to enable the institution to survive, the director of the DK typically decided to rent out parts of the building to small entrepreneurs and other commercial organisations. Meanwhile, the actual cultural work continued at a very limited level. Customers were asked to help cover the expenses for the activities they participated in. The overall attractiveness and significance of the DKs declined markedly.

Those DKs that did not perish now seem to have entered a period of better conditions. The regional and local administrations and their Departments for Culture (*otdel kul'tury, departament kul'tury*) are the patrons and main financial supporters of the DKs. In many cases, they are encouraging the DKs on their territories to sharpen their profile, to work in a particular thematic direction and thus to address the interests of different groups of users more specifically. The functions and meanings of the DKs are changing markedly. Part of the old (socialist) agenda is still valid, but more than ever directors now have to consider how to strike the balance between the obligations that come hand in hand with state support and commercially based activities, and between education and entertainment. It seems that in the mid-term perspective, entertainment prevails, but education may eventually take over again. For example, a newly emerging common theme of the DKs in the region of Novosibirsk is a strong emphasis on patriotic education (*patrioticheskoe vospitanie*), as is proposed in regional programmes (for example, www.molodoy.nsk.ru).

## "Kolyvan', Kolyvan' – krasota kuda ne glian' ( – Beauty Wherever you Look)"

In what follows, we shall get acquainted with the DK of Kolyvan', which is considered a success story, if compared with other DKs in the region of Novosibirsk. At first sight, Kolyvan' appears to be an average small town in West Siberia, although many of its 11,000 inhabitants would protest against the description of their home town as average. They point to the rich cultural heritage and architecture, dating back to the second half of the 19th century, when the town was bustling with trade and other services as Kolyvan' was a major station on the highway from Moscow to Irkutsk. When in 1896–97 the Transsiberian Railway bridge over the River Ob' was completed 50 kilometres south of Kolyvan', the town was soon surpassed in every respect by the fast grow-

analysis

ing town of Novonikolaevsk (today's Novosibirsk with approx. 1.5 million inhabitants). The small town is a district centre with a rural hinterland, yet since the late 1990s it has been turning into a remoter suburb of Novosibirsk, with people commuting daily to Novosibirsk by bus or car. Jobs in Kolyvan' are getting scarcer.

Commuters have virtually no time to participate in any activity of the local DK, or even attend any of its events, except for the most important ones, such as the commemoration (*miting*) on Victory Day, 9th of May, on the square in front of the War Memorial. The employees of the DK are mainly responsible for organizing the event, they prepare the scenario, lead the programme, put up the technical equipment etc. Children and youths who take part in any of the DK's several collectives (*khudozhestvennyi kollektiv*, lay artists with their instructors) are expected to help and be part of the show. This procedure of organizing public festivities in Kolyvan' is quite typical: the administration gives some money, the DK employees are to design and implement the event, and the people who spend their free time with rehearsing songs and dances in the DK are supposed to present them during the event.

There are also other formats of events, such as concerts by visiting collectives from other places, or competitions between lay people to be judged by a jury of DK employees. The latter sometimes travel to the countryside in order to conduct competitions, concerts and vocational training in the small rural DKs and "clubs". In these situations the Kolyvan' DK representatives skilfully display an air of *nonchalance* and superiority over their colleagues from the villages and the rural populace, but at other occasions, they themselves are put to test. Upcoming visits of the higher echelons from Novosibirsk cause considerable nervousness and extra rehearsals.

*Seeing off future soldiers: the municipality's farewell ceremony for conscripts, District DK in Kolyvan', 28 April 2006.* © J. O. Habeck

analysis

30 individuals are officially employed by the DK of Kolyvan' (in fact, people work on two or three positions both inside the DK and outside, at pedagogical institutions). Some of the employees say that working in the DK is a passion rather than a profession, and that a person needs a certain level of creative craziness in order to be able to work there. In addition to writing scenarios for all kinds of events, rehearsals with children and youths of different age are among the main daily jobs. On an average work-day, the sound of music (piano playing, singing, background music for the dancing classes) fills the corridors of the building from noon till evening. Officially the DK in Kolyvan' has 22 artistic collectives (*khudozhestvennoe formirovanie*), even if only 14 of them are really active. Of these, half are mainly for singing (*vokal'noe*) and the other half for dancing (*tantseval'noe*); there is also a very active circle of chess players. The most successful collectives receive official acknowledgement; they are designated as an "exemplary" (*obraztsovyi*) or "people's" (*narodnyi*) collective. This status goes hand in hand with enhancing the employment status of the instructor. Kolyvan' prides itself in hosting three such commendable collectives.

Less splendid, though also part of the DK's regular business, are the occasional film screenings. In the past, when people had no TV sets at home, they visited the DK more frequently to watch films, but now virtually every household has a TV. The cinema "experience" in the DK with its wooden seats and its somewhat austere ambience is not the same as in the new shiny cinema palaces in Novosibirsk (where local experts speak of a cinema revival). If the DK is unable to attract larger crowds of youths through cinema, it does manage to do so during the discos every Saturday evening, when up to 200 visitors come together. The success of the disco points most explicitly to the conflicting goals of entertainment *versus* education and "enlightenment". In the eyes of the DK employees, the disco has little if any cultural value; on the contrary, youths are getting drawn into occasional scuffles, drinking (outside the building) and other "bad habits". However, the disco continues to be one of the most popular activities of the DK.

### Pokazukha? The Show Must Go On!

This leads to the more general question as to who visits/participates in DK activities and who does not, and for what reasons. Certainly household income, age and sex, rural and urban residence, and educational level are significant criteria, but this needs closer analysis. What can be said with sufficient reliability is that many inhabitants of Kolyvan' visit the DK occasionally, though not regularly, and that the number of lay people who participate actively in the "artistic collectives" is rather small. However, even if their ranks are few they fulfil a job highly regarded by those who prefer to stay away. This job consists of keeping the communal spirit alive, and of representing the community's high level of "culturedness" to the outside world. The occasions for that are manifold, yet they vary in terms of importance and emergency. Rehearsals for a big event with important outside guests do not have to be regular, but they have to be effective. It seems as if the community, or to be more precise, the political and intellectual leadership, have to muster as much local support for the performance of *kul'tura* and *kul'turnost'* as possible when regional honoraries come to visit. The material incentives are prizes for the most skilful performers and more secure public funding for the community's cultural institutions. The immaterial gain is the small town's sustained reputation as a centre of cultural heritage and competence.

This mechanism is at work not only in Kolyvan' but also in many other communities and regions.

analysis

Some observers are inclined to describe this as *pokazukha* (playing a show, keeping the public face). Yet in addition to the show being played for outsiders, it also reaffirms the self-esteem of the community and the individual actors. *They* create the place. The DK provides the space for action. The audience is supportive because it is made up mainly of supporters: notably, the relatives and friends of those on stage. And even if the scenario, the bodily movements or the outfit may look tacky or unintentionally funny, people in the audience kindly – some of them, cheerfully – pay respect because what is at stake is the public face of the community as a whole.

To conclude, it appears that in many small towns and rural communities, the DK has retained its function as a meeting place and important point of reference in public life. What is more, people actually enjoy and take pride in presenting themselves, their collective, or their community on the stage because they can demonstrate their creativity and talent, and their "level of culturedness" (*uroven' kul'turnosti*) to their fellow community members and also to visitors from other places. The DK constitutes a site where the community is creating, negotiating and asserting its public face.

This public face, however, is also subject to official scrutiny, and the activities of the DK take place under the auspices of regional administrators and politicians. Leaving aside the disco – which is seen as a dubious enterprise because people may behave in "uncultured" ways – the agenda of the DK generally aims at promoting what a good member of society "ought to be". In other words, the DK is sustaining the moral conventions and values of mainstream society. Moreover, it serves as a tool by which the state can instigate patriotic education (see above) and similar "civil" projects. On these grounds, the DK may effectively be reclaimed by the state as a controlled environment for free time activities, as it used to be in the past.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

This research project is jointly being carried out by Brian Donahoe, Joachim Otto Habeck, Agnieszka Halemba, István Sántha and Virginie Vaté. I wish to thank my fellow researchers for their cooperation and their input.

READING SUGGESTION:

White, Anne 1990. *De-Stalinization and the House of Culture: Declining State Control over Leisure in the USSR, Poland and Hungary, 1953–89*. London; New York: Routledge.