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Rough Russian Bread and Rough Russian History

St. Petersburg has a certain duality, both natural and supernatural in history and myth, which affects every real and even theoretical person, place, or thing that comes into contact with the city. One such item is bread. Bread is inherently a very naturally aligned food in traditional Russian culture, stemming from an earthy crop that only grows during the time of year when the earth is warm and things come to life after the harshness of winter. Although a Russian city, St. Petersburg has the reputation of trying to be anything but Russian. When bread, a staple of Russian life, is combined with the supernatural city, the duality of that food in the life of everyday Russians, both noble and peasant, comes into being in many different ways.

Before the territory where the Slaves settled became the country of Russia, bread and the implements required for it were an integral and nearly sacred part of Russian culture. Since the weather was severe for most of the year, Russians relied on the warmth-generating stoves that dominated their homes. Peasants in particular adored their stoves, which were massive stone structures that took up at least a third, if not one half of the space in their huts, and were used for most of the household's daily cooking. The ovens were large and held the heat they generated from cooking during the day, thus keeping the hut warm through nights of frequently freezing temperatures during the long winter. At night, the prime spot to sleep in any peasant home was on the flat top of the stove or the shelves built along the top where it was the warmest. These spots were usually given to the smallest children or elders of the household to help them survive, while the rest of the family would sleep on benches that lined the walls of the rest of the house (Tempest 1). There-

fore the warmth that came from baking bread became associated with survival as well as the beginning and end of life.

Bread in Russian culture

Since Russia's climate is so cold for most of the year a limited number of plants could grow in the frozen soil before modern technological advances and trading. Only three months in Russia can be considered 'warm' or a 'growing season.' It was during this time that Russian peasants could grow all they needed to sell for cash in order to buy food for the winter or grow what they needed to eat. Those three months were some of the most creative for Russian culture and people based many of their festivals and beliefs around the arrival of spring or tempting spring to arrive. Primarily, peasants grew grain until the introduction of the potato. In Russia's cold north this primarily consisted of the heartier rye grain, which could withstand the harsh conditions. In the southern, warmer parts of the country, the crop was mostly wheat (Tempest 2). These grains were then ground into flour and baked into bread, or a porridge called *kasha*, which made up the bulk of the Russian peasant's diet since it was hearty and filling, and could be more easily made and grown than other kinds of food, such as vegetables or fruits (Tempest 3). The heaviness of the food also connected the Russian peasantry to their spiritual beliefs about *mat' zemlia*, or 'Mother Earth.' Peasants believed that a good meal needed to hold "[them] to the earth." Indeed, the density of bread and other grain-based dishes made this possible (Frierson 56). Bread therefore served as a bridge for the Russian peasantry between their beliefs, lives, and deaths.

Since bread became so important to the Russian peasant's existence, it only made sense that the oven would come to hold an important place in the superstitions of the people as well. As life was associated with the presence of bread, the preservation of life and healing of illness was also associated with it. When a child was sick it was customary to place the child upon the bread paddle and into the (unlit) oven for a moment then back out. Thus, the child was reborn or 'rebaked' into a healthy baby, much as one would bake dough into a loaf of bread (Tempest 9). Children and the dying both were associated with the oven, which brought life and death to a home.

When children were first born they were held near the oven and when someone died the oven was left open so that their soul could escape (Tempest 10). In this way, Russian culture came to consider the stove as a conduit for both life and death, and this extended to

views about bread. There were even riddles worked into the oral memory of the peasantry that kept beliefs about ovens and bread alive, such as:

Behind a wall, a wall

Is a bony loaf of bread.

Answer: Baby in belly.

This riddle equates new life inside a woman to a loaf of bread inside an oven (Tempest 7). When something becomes a part of a culture's oral tradition it has reached a level of great cultural importance. The appearance of riddles and words involving bread in meanings other than food shows that bread had reached this level of importance to the Russian people long before the siege of Leningrad.

Bread during the Leningrad blockade

Bread was the source of life to the Russian peasants and it was no different for the citizens of Leningrad during World War II. In September 1941, the Germans besieged the city and cut off most food supplies. The remaining food was rationed carefully with each person receiving a set, very small allotment of bread each day. Bread was the only food that was distributed daily rather than in a ten-day supply to avoid it all being consumed at once, yet the precious stock dwindled even faster (Moskoff 144). That single chunk of bread that each person received daily became the only way for most people to stay alive during the siege and the war.

Bread was quite literally the food of life for the duration of the siege. Those who survived probably owed their existence to those chunks of bread that were usually no more than what one might call "faux bread," since it was made from whatever substance could be found to supplement the shortage of grain.

Bread also came to be viewed as more than the food of life to the people of Leningrad during that dire time. Flour to bake bread became nearly worth its weight in gold, rising to thirty rubles for a pood (approximately thirty-six pounds) of flour compared to the three rubles for a kilogram (approximately two pounds) of meat (Osokina 50). Bread was also used as a form of supplementary payment to entice workers into more dangerous or more labor intensive jobs in the form of larger ration cards. These ration cards could also be used to punish workers who were not perceived as not pulling their weight in their job

by reducing their ration card level to something lower (e.g. from eight hundred grams of bread to something closer to five hundred) (Moskoff 148-149). Possessing an extra amount of bread became an indicator of social status among the lower classes of St. Petersburg. Osokina mentions that bread "had as much meaning as an extra car or house in a wealthy society" (93). Yet evidentially bread held a position of value equivalent to this before the siege of Leningrad, which can be seen in yet another riddle, originating possibly centuries before the Second World War: "What is sifted, twisted, covered with gold? Answer: Wheat bread" (Tempest 6). Baked loaves of grain therefore became symbolic of life and social status, as well as of death and poverty, during a food shortage.

At this point bread fully achieved its duality and became a permanent fixture in the history and culture of St. Petersburg. Liubov', a woman in her late twenties and St. Petersburg resident, was born in Ukraine and lived there for the first seven years of her life, yet could easily recall her grandmother, who had lived through the siege of Leningrad, becoming angry at the very idea of throwing out any amount of bread, even crumbs. She could also recall her mother insisting that she eat bread, despite the fact that she did not enjoy it. Liubov' recalled that her mother had said bread would be good for her health. Clearly the siege had a lasting impact upon the cultural memories and personalities of those who survived it in regard to the specific foods that helped them make it through the dark time. These survivors then passed these associations onto their children, who, in turn, have passed it on to their children. This can be seen in Liubov', who remarked that even though she did not eat much bread now as an adult, she still felt as though she could not eat certain meals without a piece of bread. Those meals simply did not feel complete without a slice of bread.

The bread museum

After the siege ended, bread was viewed so positively that it was seen as something to preserve and display for future generations. On Ligovskii Prospect there exists a museum that not many will have ever thought to exist: a museum of bread. The St. Petersburg State Museum of Bread, founded in 1988, is housed in a three-room exhibit that encompasses nearly the entire history of bread in Russian culture. The first thing one sees is a case filled with shrink-wrapped hunks of bread designated as astronaut or army bread based upon their shape and substance. The first room after the case is dominated by an old-fashioned Russian stove, still soot-covered and looking as though it had just popped out a fresh rack of bread a few moments ago. The rest of the museum is full of smaller exhibits—

minus the gigantic display of a Soviet era bread factory line that dominates half of the second room—which show bread in its various importance in the life of the average and non-average Russian.

From a chunk of bread that served as rations during the siege of Leningrad to a mock set-up of communion in a church (an institution that has played a large role in Russian culture), it is made perfectly clear how much bread played an important role in the life of the Russian people.

References to the important role bread has played in Russian culture can be seen even in the language of people who never lived through those difficult times. The Russian word for hospitality is literally translated as 'bread-salt,' referring to traditional offerings of bread and salt to guests, considered the most valuable commodities to possess (Frierson

56). It also refers to traditional phrases the Tsar would use to greet his guests; for instance "you will now eat bread and salt with me" (Smith & Christian 5). In that one word, links to the importance of bread and how it reflected social standing throughout Russian history can be found. Lev Tolstoi also considered bread to be important and insisted that it should be a larger part of every good Russian's diet, saying specifically that "if we continue to eat tasty and spicy comestibles (rather than these three bland food items—bread, *kasha*, and rice), our appetite for gustatory pleasure will never be satisfied but will instead keep growing larger and larger" (LeBlanc 89). Thus in literature bread has asserted its importance and lasting memory as well as the values and social aspects that are related to it.

The need for food and the life giving properties of baked good transformed bread from something Russian and backwards into something that exists in both worlds. Food—both Russian and not Russian at the same time—is an indicator of so many facets of life and is both natural and supernatural. St. Petersburg exists as a place where the extraordinary is expected and only the most fantastic creations of art, architecture, literature, and so forth can exist. It is a bridge between the fantastic and the ordinary. When the boring, old staple of ancient Russian culture made it possible for the people of St. Petersburg to survive the long and horrific siege, bread was elevated to a status akin to St. Petersburg as a bridge between life and death, which echoes back to the peasant belief regarding baked loaves and the contraption in which they were made. Therefore it is only natural that a museum celebrating food should exist in St. Petersburg rather than in Moscow or some more rural town that is perhaps known for their bread.

Conclusion

In this history of this strange city, bread has left its mark and is still important to this day. Every meal, from home-cooked to restaurant served, is presented with white or black bread. Even Liubov', who admitted that she has tried recently not to eat bread very often, said she cannot eat certain meals without a piece of bread nearby—such as soup or something greasy. On nearly every street corner there are trucks selling bread and pastries to those in a hurry or just longing for convenient, sweet treats. With a history as focused on this particular food as Russia, let alone St. Petersburg, it is no surprise that the locals demand almost instantaneous access to it. The cultural memories of the siege still echo throughout the stone streets of this city, deeply saturated in history and culture, and affect the current generation in ways they perhaps do not consciously realize. To Russians, a lack of bread historically indicates poverty, death, and even disconnection from a spiritual consciousness—which may be the most terrifying of all in this spiritually devoted country. Bread means life. Bread means wealth. Bread means higher social position. Bread means a connection to spiritual beliefs. Therefore it is no wonder that no matter if it is sweet or savory, soft or hard, a loaf or a tart, bread flourishes in this gateway to Europe with as much of a dual identity crisis as St. Petersburg, the European/Russian city with a love of baked goods that dates back generations.

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