

## Russian Club Life

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### Pre-Perestroika Clubs

During the late 1960s, in the Moscow suburb of Kupavna, a group of teenagers decided to establish their own informal club. Being enthusiasts of badminton, they built a court on a grassy lot between two buildings on Lenin Street, learned the rules of the game, arranged competitions, practiced all summer, and proclaimed themselves the Kupavna Badminton Club. At the time the name sounded somewhat anomalous, and Kupavna's regular residents and seasonal dacha-owners reacted to the club's activities with cautious bewilderment: the club building disgorged the blare of music and films, was frequently sealed with a large warehouse lock, and served as a meeting place for hoodlums. The Badminton Club never registered with the authorities, but its founding members and those who subsequently joined reverently honored the club's history, chronicling the recollected events of a common existence. They invented their own folklore and mythology, adopted secret names for all members, hatched plots, and engaged in activities typical for any closed, secret society without definite political aims.

The authorities turned a blind eye to the organization, reacting indifferently to what in Soviet times carried potential political implications: a collection of seeming jocks preoccupied not with the "native" game of skittles or even the volleyball beloved by Soviet citizens, but an alien, elegant sport incomprehensible to the novice-onlooker. Since the club's occupation of the grassy plot prevented its use as both pasture for the locals' cows and venue for the relaxation and cultural pursuits of the vacationing dacha-owners, an indignant minority made an effort to liquidate the courts. A group of homeowners on Lenin Street thwarted those attempts, for none

of the players had ever been seen drunk or disorderly, and the local roughs treated them with respect, secretly learning how to play badminton themselves.

Why was this organization a club? Why not a team or a group? The importance lies, of course, partly in the word itself, haloed in the mystique of semi-legality and enticing exotica, as wonderful and remote as the prestigious English Club of Pushkin's era or the British lords' clubs and millionaires' golf clubs known only through books. Equally important was the club's role as an alternative to existing official peer groups, such as Young Pioneer camps, the Communist Youth league, and so forth. The club's philosophy and motto, "freedom of lifestyle," confirmed its oppositional or independent orientation.

As in many youth organizations, sports determined the club's *modus vivendi*: all members happily raced their bicycles around the surrounding areas, hiked, cycled to the local lake for nocturnal swims, and played soccer and various athletic games. Additional club activities included celebratory marches along the village streets, which were fancifully divided among the club's members as duchies, princedoms, and kingdoms; parties with music; and interminable discussions on any porch where members happened to meet—usually, that of club president Andrey Krasil'nikov, whose club alias was Prince Metel'skii. Adults often participated in these exchanges, which led to arguments about every conceivable topic: politics, aspects of the country's past not described in conventional textbooks, chess championships, the meaning of Christianity, and the latest French detective novel.<sup>1</sup> Democracy ruled these debates; its participants were not predictably confined to the offspring of the Moscow intelligentsia, for sons and daughters of locksmiths, of officers in the Soviet army, and of grocery store clerks also argued and drank tea with the locals during these summer marathons. (See Fig. IV.1.)

In 1997, the thirtieth anniversary of the Kupavna Badminton Club was celebrated on the very same Lenin Street. Today, the people who previously formed the club's backbone are scientists, government officials, teachers, construction workers, a subway driver and a playwright, a housewife, and one of the unemployed. In Kupvana, these distinctions are irrelevant, for of the many clubs now popular in the Russian capital, the Badminton Club is probably the most democratic, retaining its original openness to diverse social backgrounds, various philosophical allegiances, to old friends



Fig. VI. 1. The Kupavna Badminton Club in the days of yore.

and neophytes alike. As before, the club has its folklore, music making, and discussions over tea, often around a bonfire. The membership fee is equal to that of a high-quality badminton set, but when the shuttlecocks fly, today's players are the children of the old members.

The Kupavna Badminton Club, one of the oldest organizations of its type and unregistered to this day, had no concrete, practical goal other than to make people's lives more meaningful and comfortable. During the period of Stagnation, that modest but idealistic goal informed many of the era's clubs. The Moscow State University Department of Journalism at the end of the 1970s saw the formation of *A Comfortable Evening*, a club named after a poem by Théophile Gautier, essentially linked by nothing more than an enthusiasm for pleasurable pastimes: listening to old music, drinking cheap French cognacs and wines, eating delicacies by candlelight among a select group of gourmets. The club's agenda included readings of Silver Age authors, with long dresses obligatory for women and bow ties for men. Such gatherings were prompted not so much by a search for the lost Atlantis of Russian culture or an escape into the past,<sup>2</sup> but a yearning for an alternative to the stifling official culture of the Brezhnev era. And that apolitical goal rendered such organizations potentially subversive. (The intoxicating days of perestroika witnessed the birth of many analogous clubs, but with more clearly defined profiles and amidst lengthy soul-searching within youth culture.)

Late stagnation also boasted myriad special-interest clubs, sometimes called "societies" or "schools," but more often labeled "clubs" on account of the magic associations the term held for the intelligentsia. Bibliophile clubs proliferated throughout the country in the 1970s, their ties with the state publishing organization, *Soiuzpechat*, enabling members to sign up for out-of-stock publications or limited-access literature. Amateur flower growers gathered so as to fashion bouquets, distribute seedlings that were in short supply, cultivate room-size plots, and aid their owners in maintaining them. Dog breeders' clubs proved extraordinarily popular with animal lovers, assisting with cures, grooming, and caretaking; arranging shows; distributing puppies of rare breeds; and helping to mate young dogs. With the 1980s, clubs for lovers of cats, birds, and other animals became the rage.

Numerous World War II veterans' clubs likewise existed, had connections with local Party organizations, and usually convened

in the homes of apartment building managers. These clubs had an active agenda, making presentations in school and in front of apartment buildings, hanging posters and flags for holidays, agitating for volunteers to clean the courtyards of buildings on Saturdays, and so on.

Clubs also existed in schools (though usually they were called "groups"), including international friendship clubs, which prepared information sessions about East Bloc countries, made posters with articles and cutouts from illustrated magazines, and corresponded with young people from Poland, Bulgaria, Hungary, and the German Democratic Republic. Depending on opportunity and the enthusiasm of the school administration, International Friendship Clubs sometimes visited the Eastern Bloc countries, or hosted students from these nations. There were municipal children and teenage clubs, a Young Art Historians Club at the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, which accepted interested advanced high school students on a competitive basis. They gave lectures, made presentations, and discussed art. An analogous organization for journalists formed at Moscow State University, calling itself the Young Journalist School. Many children's clubs met in the building manager's apartment and in Pioneer palaces of culture. These were groups uniting those with a common interest. Several clubs, especially those founded by innovative teachers and connected with literature, met at people's homes for discussions.

In the Siberian city of Sverdlovsk (now Ekaterinburg again), the author Krapivin founded a club, while in Moscow the teacher-writer Simon Soloveichik founded the Scarlet Sail, named after Aleksandr Grin's famous adventure novel. In collaboration with the newspaper *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, the club provided a Scarlet Sail page for teenagers. The organizers who oversaw these activities were romantics, children of Khrushchev's Thaw, convinced of the country's inevitable shift to democracy. The Scarlet Sail Club became an outpost for progressive youth, a launching pad for experiments and dissemination of new ideas, which essentially endorsed "socialism with a human face." The group's ideology favored "kommunarstvo" (communality): common activities, living quarters, and interests. Many of today's renowned journalists experienced Scarlet Sail's "kommunarstvo," including Valentin Yumashev, the director of the Yeltsin administration. The club Scarlet Sail lasted for a fairly long time, supported by the enthusiasm of its founders and their convictions, which could be published on the

pages of *Komsomol'skaia pravda*. The active young members of the club, which had branches throughout Moscow, sensed their identity as "outposts of culture" and studied the freedom movements of diverse countries, conducted psychological training, and arranged lectures in all areas of knowledge.

The equation of club with relaxation was a concept firmly embedded in the Soviet consciousness. Farm and village clubs were basically movie theaters or dance halls, places where out-of-town artists sometimes performed and active members held meetings. As a rule, there was a club in every populated area, and the state was obligated to provide a director for it. Clubs (or Houses of Culture) were housed in large factories, specialized training institutes or technical schools. One of the entrances to the Main Building of Moscow State University, in fact, is called the Club Entrance, and there is also a Club Section. Varied activities took place: there was an almost ubiquitous Interesting Meetings Club, which invited movie directors, artists, writers, and cosmonauts to visit workers or club participants.

The word "club" is indisputably associated with the Acquaintance Club for those over 30. As a rule, on the premises of such organizations as a local club or a House of Culture their overseers organized dancing, trivia contests, and talks for single (or lonely) people who wished to get to know someone of the opposite sex.

However music and dancing may have absorbed people at such gatherings, in the 1970s and 1980s the word "discotheque" still lacked the synonym of "disco club," which appeared only later. Representatives of artistic professions (in contrast to scientists and pedagogues) stubbornly named their clubs Author's House, Actor's House, House of Film, and so forth. Restaurants and cafes within these establishments were called clubs, highlighting the special nature of the interaction within the framework of such institutions.

Indeed, during the Soviet era, the word "club" appeared ceaselessly in print, designating catch-all rubrics or problems. The Discussion Club of the newspaper *Literaturnaia gazeta* (*Literary Gazette*) enjoyed impressive popularity in the 1960s and 1970s, publishing original and entertaining articles, to lively, enthusiastic responses from readers appreciative of the Club's willingness to openly explore issues normally avoided or proscribed. The same newspaper provided a forum for the humorous Twelve Chairs Club (after the novel by Il'f and Petrov), while *Komsomol'skaia pravda*



the word “club” here denoted the symbiosis of three features: discussion of problems with volatile or humorous potential by people joined through common interests; an identifiable publication style; and a degree of unusualness in perspective or approach. Journalists loved to invoke the term “club,” probably because it carried ambivalent markers: on the one hand, it inscribed thoroughly Soviet structures (like the farm clubs), yet, on the other hand, it was fundamentally anti-Soviet inasmuch as it allowed for oblique “Aesopian” language.

In short, before perestroika, the word “club” had multiple meanings: it referred to a meeting place, a location for relaxation and culture in an organized, supervised mode. It embraced a group of people who shared an enthusiasm for a given pursuit. And it usually presupposed and resulted in a regimented or at least codified style of interaction and behavior. These three meanings underwent dramatic change during the years of Russian reforms.

In 1986, as a journalist, I was commissioned by APN Publishing to compile a directory of the Soviet Union’s social organizations. The profusion of clubs was astonishing, though unsurprising, perhaps, in a period when debate and fundamental reassessment in a constantly shifting context were at a peak. Most registered organizations were clubs founded on common interests, but the sheer number was staggering, and gave a foretaste of the club-mania ushered in by desovietization in 1991.

### Clubs in the 1990s

The 1990s witnessed a veritable explosion of clubs, so that it is practically impossible today to enumerate the exact number of registered clubs in Moscow alone, which, according to the Moscow branch of the Ministry of Justice, number in the hundreds and are augmented by countless unregistered clubs. With the breakdown of Soviet uniformity, society splintered into groups pursuing a dizzying range of hobbies, passions, and pastimes. It would not be an exaggeration to label the 1990s in Russia the Club Era, a phenomenon partly accounted for by the desire to recapture a bygone epoch of identity-based enclaves denied for seven decades by the uniformity promulgated by Soviet ideology.

### “New Russian” Clubs or New “Russian” Clubs?

Of all Postsoviet Moscow clubs the most ambitious, unquestionably, is the culturally evocative English Club,<sup>3</sup> which in name

and orientation manifestly claims the identity of rightful successor to the fabled English Club of the tsarist era. Uniting high finance, high pretensions, and people in high places, it is the club of clubs. A sanctuary for the elect in search of refined relaxation, it is located on Chistye Prudy Way, requires a membership fee of \$7,000, boasts its own restaurant and conference rooms, and arranges diverse outings for its members, including lavish dinners *cum* conversations twice a week at the most prestigious restaurants in and outside the city. The club combines stylish relaxation with an opportunity for establishing business contacts. If some have expressed dissatisfaction with the club's failure to provide worldly socializing, despite the endless round of rich lunches and concerts, sled rides, and children's celebrations, it is because these activities serve as a prelude to (or pretext for) the formation of a stable oligarchy—a collusion of business and power interests under the eagle-eyed leadership of the respected club elder, Mayor Yury Luzhkov.

Apart from financial bigwigs and leading businessmen, numerous assistants and colleagues of the mayor and the Moscow administration swell out the club's ranks. Several famous representatives of the arts, as well as the editors of all the major popular newspapers, have been enlisted to "embellish" this new incarnation of the English Club. An eloquent example of the club's political activity was the election campaign for Duma deputies in 1996, in which all club members desiring to become deputies were entered on the "Luzhkov list," receiving maximum support from the incumbent municipal government.

The Club offers its members a set of convenient services ranging from babysitting to quality plumbing, schedules discussions on political and historical topics, orchestrates shows and fashion galas, and oversees presentations. Recently, the Club took part in honoring "Woman of the Year" Irene Lesnevskaja, nominated by the Russian-American Women's Alliance. Undoubtedly, the Club will support Luzhkov in the upcoming presidential election.<sup>4</sup>

The English Club is neither the only, nor the most expensive, such club in Moscow. Membership in the Rotary Club and Monolith is even costlier, the latter's starting at \$10,000. These clubs, which share the English Club's pretensions to elite chic, are fairly closed. Their sphere of activities and interests coincide with those of the English Club, though their political cast is less perceptible. Both emphasize the "elite" nature of their membership, purvey services and relaxation for "the chosen" with the same veneer of



aristocratism, and bear the stamp of “New Russian” aspirations that characterizes the English Club.

Membership in other “New Russian” clubs comes at much lower prices, as, for example, in the Moscow Automotive Club (established by Slaviia Bank for import owners), which charges \$300 per year for the cheapest membership card. The card gives discounts on repairs when buying automobile parts from certain companies, and provides free towing once a year. It also covers a new type of service entirely in the New Russian spirit: intoxicated drivers—and among New Russians they constitute a not insignificant percentage—can call a driver who will take the incapacitated home in their own vehicles. Charges for the card rise according to the frequency with which members call for “free” transport of both car and owner.

Expensive clubs attract the business elite. Many observe an appreciably more stringent policy of exclusiveness than adopted by the English Club. Whereas the latter invites journalists for advertising purposes, various “business clubs” have no incentive to advertise: members gather not so much to drink or visit the bathhouse (*bania*), as to solve common problems of an economic or political nature. These closed gatherings often result in executive decisions concerning entire branches of industry. Such clubs represent less a purely cultural phenomenon than one of contemporary economic and political life, and they testify to the growing alignments and “group mentality” within Russian society in the 1990s. At any event, elitism, pomposity, and callow taste mark numerous clubs of this sort.

## New Political Clubs

Political clubs, which exceeded 50 in number during the early 1990s, differ from New Russian clubs. Some, like the Russian Governors Club headed by Anatoly Tyazhlov, remain a baffling enigma for the uninitiated. According to its members, this particular club deals exclusively with the problems of its members—all of them governors.

An imposing political organization is the influential Club 93. Founded in 1993 by Viacheslav Nikonov, president of the Politics Fund, together with the political analysts Georgii Satarov, Andranik Migranian, and Aleksei Salmin, it meets monthly in Moscow’s Arbat Hotel. Luminaries in the field of contemporary politics gather for

the club's discussions, which at each session assess a specific topic of general interest to those present. The atmosphere is informal, and the evening normally ends with a banquet.

The Club on Bol'shaia Nikitskaia Street, likewise well known, was founded by Yegor Gaidar in 1993 as the Center for Liberal-Conservative politics, and intended as a place meeting for political and business representatives. The club's current director is Arkadii Murashov, former Minister of Internal Affairs and one-time Secretary of the Supreme Soviet under Gorbachev. The club brings together more than 40 corporate and 200 individual members: government officials, deputies, and bankers. Each member pays an annual fee into the club budget, which allows him to frequent the club's restaurant, attend all exhibits, meetings, and so forth. Another political club founded by Gaidar, called Cooperation (1992), exists to this day as a forum for debates on economic questions.

One of the city's best-known organizations is the Realists Club, associated with the New Socialism Movement and since its inception in late 1993 headed by Iurii Petrov (former chief of the State Investment Corporation). The Realists Club meets at the Moscow mayoral office, the House of Scientists, and the Central House of Professionals in the Arts, where it conducts monthly discussions on themes relevant to the group's interests. Members periodically celebrate jubilees and have receptions, funded with sponsors' money, to which they invite journalists. Private contributions and membership dues of 500,000 rubles per year make up the budget. The Club actively publishes, printing not only discussion materials and round table reports several times a year, but also the newspaper *For a New Socialism*.

Among political organizations meriting attention, the Parliament Club meets in the State Duma's Lower Chamber on Wednesdays and Fridays every two weeks after plenary sessions. The organization owes its existence to an initiative by Gennadii Burbulis and Duma deputies in 1994.

## Professional Clubs

Professional interest clubs unite the most disparate people. The Moscow Lawyers Club, founded by Valery Rubnev in the early 1990s, brings together more than 50 lawyers and notaries, as well as domestic and foreign judges. They usually convene on Thurs-

exchange views on pertinent problems, then enjoy a sumptuous buffet. Those guests who are invited from time to time tend to be journalists writing on law.

Among the clubs openly created so as to lobby for corporate interests, the most interesting is the Moscow International Oil Club. Specialists presently consider this club not as influential as, for instance, the Commercial Bank Club in London, Paris, and Rome, but it aspires to exert considerable influence on society. Founded in 1994 as a Russian-American organization, it now unites 40 oil companies from Russia, the United States, Europe, and Japan. Membership is confined to lawyers and representatives of sizable oil-refining companies. The founders and “brains” of the club were Viktor Chernomyrdin, Transneft president Valerii Chernaev, and Rei Irani, president of Occidental Petroleum. Earlier, the latter two in turn occupied the position of club president, and now function as co-presidents. In 1997, Boris Nemtsov became honorary chairman. Since the club still lacks its own premises, meetings normally take place in the premier Moscow restaurants: The Savoy, Metropole, or the club Monolith.

## Night Clubs

A recent innovation in Postsoviet Russia, night clubs are synonymous with New Russian life (not to be confused with life in the new Russia). The novelty of neon lights, deafening music, and oblivious abandonment to pleasure in public has proven seductive above all for the young and fashionably restless, those involved in pop culture, and representatives of the Moscow art scene. Night clubbers generally belong to younger generations than those attracted to business clubs. After all, night-club festivities conventionally begin after midnight, and consist primarily of frenetic dancing to ear-splitting music, amidst blinding, garish lights that provide artificial illumination for the pillars of smoke looming above the hot masses of gyrating bodies.

Many night clubs essentially derive from the older discotheques, but strive for a “cooler” “in” look, boasting a bar and restaurant, sometimes live music, and, invariably, the burly presence of security. These clubs multiplied rapidly, and now span a wide spectrum, from the famous Manhattan Express and Pilot (with a cover charge ranging from \$10 to \$50, depending on the night’s program, and a periodic discount for women), to the Friends of the

Mayakovsky Theater Club and Last Chance, the latter organized by members of the Mark Rozovskii Theater, with an entrance fee in 1998 of from ten to a hundred new rubles.

As a rule, night clubs do not have casinos (although the largest casinos have clubs), but sometimes provide billiards tables and rooms for watching television and video cassettes. Billiards has grown into one of the most widespread forms of entertainment: whereas earlier, only special resorts for Party officials or artists' dachas owned such facilities, now almost every club or social organization has a table, around which fans congregate in droves.

Many night clubs feature regular programs and shows. The Utopia disco-club on Pushkin Street invites popular contemporary groups and solo singers. Manhattan Express mounts a show every evening, striving for maximum variety. For instance, the club's program for the last week of March, 1998, included the following: Monday: Terrarium Snake Show, featuring live battles with pythons, crocodiles, giant lizards, and an Egyptian cobra. No cover charge for women. Tuesday: participants from the New Names performer competition. Wednesday: singer and composer Sergey Mudrov, followed by the group Adam! and "Music of the Year 2000." Thursday: a clothes collection by the designer Veronika Lazareva, and the show "Tears of Rain." Friday: the musical group "Chaif." Saturday: a children's show in the evening, followed by a hairstylist's show, with the participation of famous performance artists.

The Manhattan Express restaurant is open from 6 p.m. until 4 a.m., while the club operates from 8 p.m. until 6 a.m. Among its facilities number the standard billiards tables and a VIP lounge. An indication of the club's sophistication is its acceptance of payment by assorted credit cards (most clubs still recognize only the best known, such as Visa) and its discounts on some cards and for customers staying at the Hotel Rossiia, on whose premises the club is located. The basic clientele consists of young New Russians and foreign visitors. Local "culture mavens" are admitted free to cultural events, though access to the most interesting ones is exceptionally difficult, since the line of hopefuls stretches out onto the street.

The club monitors visitors assiduously: security frisks everyone who enters, refusing admission to anyone with mace or weapons. A curious force called "face control" politely turns away any customers deemed excessively drunk or on drugs. Women are not exempt from this screening procedure. Past the foyer, the club opens

into a huge room with a bar, a stage, dining tables, and a dance floor. On average, a glass of juice costs four dollars, while a glass of wine costs six, and a one-course meal in the restaurant area runs to \$30.

Middle-aged businessmen and well-heeled visitors to Moscow can afford such prices and comprise the regular clientele. Occasionally, young people (some working for private companies, some unemployed) spend all their free evenings and nights at the club, drawn by the "interesting things to do," friends, and good music. The management recognizes such regulars, and, perhaps surprisingly, lets them enter without cover charge or delay.

Run by Anton, son of the famous theater performer Oleg Tabakov, the Pilot Club is located in the Krasnaia Presnia neighborhood, on the premises of the former Zuev House of Culture, near the Trekhgorka factory. The motif of aviation rules the interior, which contains such items as a model cockpit, the wing of an aircraft, and photographs of old airplanes. The club, which suspends its cover charge once a week, attracts Moscow's young and the theater crowd, periodically arranging contemporary art performances. In contrast to the Manhattan Express, Pilot cultivates more intimate, cozy surroundings, and draws fewer foreigners.

The Last Chance Club, housed in a basement, is a tiny establishment offering Tex-Mex cuisine. Every night a new jazz group plays in the club's bar. Although the majority of habitués are young Muscovites from the city center, foreigners also flock here, doubtless drawn by the food and such groups as the Byzantine Cardplayers Club, which plays classic American jazz numbers.

True to Postsoviet cash-conscious tendencies, many restaurants that keep late hours rely on the expedient of calling themselves "clubs," so as to justify their collection of a handsome entrance fee. This practice is exemplified by the former Central House of Literati (TsDL), which after lavish reconstruction has nothing in common with the profession of letters other than its newly adopted name of The Literati's Club. Nowadays monied visitors (others cannot afford entry) encounter a doorman dressed in livery before passing through to the famous Oak Hall, which retains its understated beauty but is now filled with mirrored buffet tables piled high with delicacies and fine silver. Guests eat off resplendent dinnerware, and the kitchen models itself after the Slavic Bazaar celebrated by the cultural historian Giliarovskii.<sup>5</sup> The prices are commensurate with the gilded setting: a modest lunch for two starts at \$100. Natu-

rally, no contemporary writers eat here, for the luxury matches the purchasing power only of the New Russians, who enjoy dining in the former citadel of Moscow's creative elite.

From Dawn to Dusk, an upscale night club that opened in November 1997 and was inspired by Quentin Tarantino's 1996 vampire western, features strippers and projections onto a large screen of selections from the films of Tarantino, arguably Russia's favorite American auteur.<sup>6</sup> The visuals stimulate strippers/"hostesses" to lead clients onto the dance floor and partly or completely undress them. Cognac here costs 250 dollars a glass, and the majority of those able to pay such ruinous prices have criminal connections—a fact that perhaps explains the saliency of Tarantino to Russian night-club life, attested by the presence of other Tarantino-clones, one on the outskirts of Moscow, called Jack Rabbit Slim's, and Four Rooms, a smoky basement disco near the Kremlin.

If, as some Russians claim, Tarantino made bad taste "hip," he would be delighted by the now defunct stripclub called The Hungry Duck, which has prompted many bemused articles by Western journalists. A perspiringly hectic atmosphere of "anything goes" dominated the Hungry Duck, located near the former KGB citadel (Lubianka) and reputed to be "Moscow's premier den of binge drinking, bar dancing, and other assorted forms of good-time sin and iniquity" (Humphreys 13). Owned by the Canadian Doug Steele, the Duck spotlighted male strippers, who bared their all to the titillated, drunken screams of the largely teen, mostly female, audience. After consuming enough alcohol to lose inhibitions, young women would leap onto the bar top, tear off their clothes, and perform their own frenzied terpsichorean numbers.

According to one journalist, the stream of hopefuls waiting outside to gain entry into the hot, raucous dimness of the club outnumbered any customer-lines of recent memory. One estimate cited 700 squealing female fans, aged between 15 and 20, per night (Fisher). Female enthusiasts could drink for free and pay only ten rubles' entrance fee, compared to the 50 rubles charged men, and on Ladies' Night the latter were banned until the performance by the male strippers ended (Reeves). Economics dictated policy, for Steele reportedly spent approximately \$800 on free drinks for the woman and \$750 for the strippers, but collected in the vicinity of \$6,500 from the men who followed. NASA astronauts, apparently,



were habitués of the club, which reacted with equanimity to the sight of couples coupling under tables at four in the morning (Fisher). A more sedate version of this club, with ex-military men comprising the strippers' ensemble, is the Up and Down club housed in an annex of the Russian foreign ministry (Higgins 1).

A host of new night clubs fulfills the earlier role of hard-currency restaurants at fashionable hotels for foreigners: as a venue for buying and selling sexual services. Mistresses of New Russians accompany their "sponsors" to such night clubs, but countless customers come alone in search of a prostitute for a single night. Probably most famous among these is The Night Flight Club, under Swedish management, which advertises through signs urging "Night Flight, Do It Tonight" posted around the inbound hall of Moscow's Sheremet'ev Airport. Opened in 1992, the establishment, located in the city center, targets foreign clients. Charging men an entrance fee of \$30 for a single drink, it simultaneously gives them the opportunity to be propositioned by any of the beautiful young women offering their services for \$200 or more a night. The exotic beauties conduct their business with impressive efficiency: before embarking on a conversation, they ascertain whether the gentleman has an apartment or room at a hotel. Upon receiving a negative response, they politely excuse themselves and leave. If during the Soviet era prostitutes in hard-currency bars frequently included educated women with university degrees who were thus capable of geishalike discussions, today's "ladies of the night" are not intellectually overburdened and often flock to Moscow from distant cities and countries of the CIS for purely pragmatic purposes. Quite appropriately, soft porn glossies carry ads for the club (see Goscilo's essay on glossies in this issue).

Interestingly, nightclubs of the 1990s also facilitate contacts between male prostitutes and the wealthy foreign women whom they select as clients. One visitor to The Blizzard Club noted that immediately after her arrival with a female American friend, several men gathered around them, wanting to show how well they danced. "I had never danced with a group of so many handsome young men who spoke English," the visitor confessed. As soon as a young male friend of hers from Moscow appeared, the handsome men vanished into thin air, then began grouping around other foreign women. In short, night clubs offer not only fine (if overpriced) food, music, and entertainment, but the possibility of chance sexual contacts.

## Special Interest Clubs

Clubs based on shared interests have not only survived, but dramatically multiplied, for in the Postsoviet era voluntary group activities have become fashionable. One such club, headed by Dmitrii Lomakov, unites aficionados and collectors of old automobiles. Lomakov belongs to a unique family that for three generations has collected antique cars. His father restored Lenin's Rolls Royce, kept until recently in the Lenin Museum. The family collection includes cars that at one time belonged to Stalin and Goebbels, and these vehicles and others have regularly been filmed in movies. What makes these automobiles so remarkable for collectors is that they are fully restored, with no new parts violating their integrity. Indeed, authenticity is the presiding principle of the club, and as its guiding spirit Lomakov holds traditions sacred. He maintains a home page on the internet and exchanges news and information electronically with fellow enthusiasts. The current club membership of 120 reflects a shrinkage of 90 percent in size from 15 years ago, however. Ironically, Lomakov cannot afford to purchase a car for himself, and travels on foot. He takes pride, however, in the Moscow municipal government's recent apportionment of a piece of land for the construction of a Club Museum of Antique Automobiles. Lokamov's cohorts not only collect antique cars, but recently have founded clubs for fans of old Russian makes of car. There is a Retro-Volga branch of the club for owners of Volga automobiles from the 1960s and 1970s, as well as a Retro-Moskvich branch, and others.

Another automobile-focused club is dedicated to sports cars. The Porsche Club brings together both racers and their fans. Its founder, the former leader of the Spartacus Sports Club, Nikita Kiselev, also established an automobile service network, arranged for Porsche to have a representative in Russia, and opened a store. While operating his business, Kiselev has not abandoned the club, which organizes races, participates in international competitions, collects information on the history of the Porsche company, and helps its members when necessary.

## Residence Clubs

Virtually none of the clubs that during the Soviet era used to assemble in building managers' quarters remain. Their disappearance

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ance has deprived retirees of a regular meeting place and caused worry among parents of adolescents that their offspring are left to their own devices. A very recent small increase in old-style residence clubs resulted from the Moscow administration's decision on the eve of the city's 850th anniversary to organize the city's housing and recreation facilities by place of residence. In the Kuntsevo neighborhood alone there are 15 residence clubs receiving municipal support (ten years ago there were hundreds). One of these, the Zodiac Club, celebrated its 25th anniversary in 1998. The teacher Aleksandra Ivanovna Orlova has served as the club's director throughout its existence. The club is located on the first floor of a 17-story apartment building off the Moscow Ring Highway, the bus ride to the nearest subway station taking almost half an hour. The area has no movie theaters or other cultural centers, though the part of the neighborhood in which Zodiac meets is densely populated with retirees and children. When a private company wanted to take over the club's premises, local residents staged a demonstration, demanding that the club be preserved. The various rooms at the club's disposal accommodate several dozen children's groups, variously devoted to music, handicrafts, foreign languages, dancing and rhythmic, rehearsals of children's plays and puppet shows, and preparation for school of its youngest members. Almost all the activities cost nothing, and many teachers instruct the children without accepting payment. Foreign language tutors collect a third of the usual sum paid private tutors, which is a godsend for financially strapped parents. Sometimes mothers accompany their children after work, to drink tea, talk, enjoy a break from their rounds of domestic chores, and take part in the work of one group or another. Many women have developed an enthusiasm for handicrafts, and some have even discovered specialized skills at Zodiac.

Retirees not only meet weekly, but, by agreement with a neighborhood polyclinic, have access to a free check-up from a doctor or therapist on the premises twice a month. Zodiac exists thanks to the enthusiasm of its colleagues (two staff members—a director and a manager—who receive a paltry salary even by Russian standards) and the residents, who contribute whatever they can to the club: one brings candy, another brings utensils, and yet another, flowers. This club is the only place in the city where people can come anytime, with or without children, either to relax or to chat and share impressions. (See Fig. IV.2.)



Fig. VI. 2. The Zodiac Residence Club in the 1990s.  
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## Creative Clubs

As a discrete, identifiable category, creative clubs have not yet defined their profile. The House of Journalists, earlier called the Moscow Journalists' Club, has several clubs under its aegis: the Women Veterans' Journalist Club, the Veteran Journalists' Club, and the Film Enthusiasts' Club. Although the House of Journalists' former restaurant is a popular meeting place, the number of journalists and participants in the organization's discussions has markedly shrunk. That decrease has occurred in nearly all other clubs of this sort: many of their former members have moved on to places more attuned to the current moment, while other members simply stay at home and visit each other without engaging the broader social arena. Yet others prefer chance encounters and exchanges at numerous presentations to club gatherings.

## Health Clubs

Health clubs have overrun Moscow in the Postsoviet era, most of them containing the standard sauna, pool, workout area, and the services of a health-specialist and a trainer. Membership fees vary according to the club, ranging from a few dollars a month to \$2,000 per year. One of the newest clubs of this type is the Fit and Fun Deluxe Sport and Health Club in the fashionable Chistye Prudy neighborhood. The club offers its members spacious quarters with aerobics classes, a workout area, pool, three types of steam baths, a solarium, makeup salon, hairdresser, restaurant, café, bars, and kindergarten. The World Fitness Corporation, with Ol'ga Slutsker, wife of the oil tycoon Vladimir Slutsker, as its president, is essentially an enormous, chic club catering to the nouveaux riches, and likewise provides all the amenities to which the fast-spending class of new entrepreneurs has become accustomed (Singer).

## Women's Clubs

Desovietization ushered in a host of women's clubs, particularly in Moscow. The trend, however, dates from the dawn of perestroika, which witnessed the rise of such independent organizations as the 33+1 Club—a group of foreign woman journalists who would elect a man as the Knight of the Hour and interview him in a style reminiscent of Barbara Walters at her most fatuous. A Diplomats' Wives Club for the spouses of foreign diplomats came

into being, presided over by the wife of United States Ambassador Pickering.

Clubs for business women began to multiply at a rapid rate, the best-known being the Moscow Businesswoman's Club (acronymed as Dzhen Club), headed by Nina Iakovchuk and accredited with the United Nations Committee on Women's Rights. It first appeared in 1989 under the auspices of the *Economic Gazette* newspaper, where Iakovchuk then worked. Officially registered with the authorities in 1992, it reached a membership of 170, which has held steady to this day.

The club brings together collective members, such as the Trekhgorka textile mill and the Freedom perfumery, as well as individuals: bankers, managers, scientists, and figures active in science and culture. It organizes a key event once every quarter, but certain projects are ongoing. For example, in collaboration with the University of Manchester, the club has exploited the technology of the "electronic village" to create a database network on work in the home. In addition, the club quite often orchestrates meetings with women entrepreneurs from other cities and countries, and has taken part in women's conferences and agitated for women's entrepreneurship. Although commercially active insofar as it helps develop its members' businesses, the club does not broaden its purview to include, for example, the women's movement.

Another club including many women entrepreneurs, founded in 1998 but differing fundamentally in profile, is the Women's Political Club of the Fund for Reconciliation and Harmony, supported by the Patriarch of All Russia, Aleksey. Conceived as a political organization, it concentrates on advancing women's political initiatives, supporting female candidates for Duma deputies, and focusing the country's attention on the most pressing social problems. Entrepreneurs, journalists, and activists comprise the club's membership.

The Raisa Maksimovna Club (named after Gorbachev's wife, also its titular head) was founded in 1997, yet is murkily defined in terms of its goals. According to Raisa Maksimovna, the club resulted from requests for collaboration by a group of women, mainly from academia, intent on identifying and drawing attention to complex problems and raising funds for socially significant projects. These goals remain theoretical: two discussions concerning the status of women and of children in Russia achieved little besides demonstrating the group's poor organization and extraordinary verbos-



ity. However admirable Raisa Maksimovna's intentions, she created the impression of someone far removed from the issues in question and uncertain about how to address them. The opening was marked by great ceremony and attended by numerous journalists, who, not knowing what to ask in such a situation, mainly inquired about Mikhail Sergeevich Gorbachev's health. For the time being, since neither the club's agenda nor its ideas or priorities are clear, it cannot occupy a visible position in the women's movement or in the country's cultural life. Despite endless deliberations, so far the club has not supported a single project. The notion of forming a club under the former First Lady's aegis seemed promising, and eventually may yield useful results. So far, however, the club's work consists of infrequent discussions of issues and weekly meetings of its active members, who plan these discussions and consume enormous quantities of tea.<sup>7</sup>

Women's clubs have united in varying degrees female representatives of the creative professions who simply enjoy spending time together. Mariia Arbatova's now defunct feminist Harmony Club, for example, grew out of conversations among friends at the House of Writers and then at the Central House of Artists. Female literati met to discuss a specific topic, then to stretch and dance, so as "to relieve stress and pressure," followed by a psychologist's presentation and the requisite cake with tea. As a cultural form, the club corresponded ideally to the creative nature of its members and, not coincidentally, recently Arbatova created the Women's Club, which concerns itself with politics. Somewhat different in orientation from Harmony, it schedules weekly meetings of its 20-odd female members at one of Moscow's art galleries. As a rule, a male speaker—a representative of the President's administration, a leading banker, political scientist, or economist—makes a presentation, usually followed by a discussion led by Arbatova. In short, the club offers its female members a forum for expressing their views.

Another club of women in the creative arts to emerge at the very beginning of the 1990s is Transformation, founded by the entrepreneur Diana Medman and several women variously associated with literature. Its chief feminist ideologue for a number of years was Tat'iana Klimenkova, who holds an advanced degree in philosophy. In addition to arranging readings and presentations, the group published not only the feminist almanac *Preobrazhenie* (*Transformation*), of which fewer than a half-dozen issues have

appeared, but also collections of its members' poetry. From its inception the club was determinedly closed and unreceptive to new members, though in its meetings with Western literati it declared itself the only organization representing a feminist viewpoint on Russian culture. Several well-known women writers (Valeriia Narbikova, Svetlana Vasilenko, Larisa Vaneeva) who at one time worked with the club subsequently distanced themselves from it. With the mid-1990s, the club's financial support declined precipitously, its projects decreased, and publication of the almanac faces perennial problems. The club's present activities remain a mystery, but it continues to exist, if only in theory.

Although women's clubs vary significantly, as a rule they tend to be short-lived (an exception being the international women's club Elle). Several attempts have been made to create women's clubs in various organizations. For a long time the Socialist-Democratic Party of Russia, which has a women's faction, debated this idea, and, as in most recent discussions about establishing a club, inevitably dwelled on a steam bath, hairdresser's, and restaurant as necessary conditions for the club's existence. The Women's Political Club proposes to move all its nonessential services (including its restaurant and business center) to a separate building in the center of Moscow, into an apartment donated by one of the club's founders. Despite the diversity of women's clubs, which range from corporations of female entrepreneurs to forums for group discussion, ladies' circles, and places of relaxation, their influence on women's lives in general is virtually nil, and the percent of Russian women participating in them, minimal.

## Conclusion(s)

Club life in Moscow (and throughout the country) has taken on new, invigorated life during the Postsoviet era. While some retain various trappings of the Soviet period, other, newly-formed clubs have followed other models and pursue activities unimaginable during earlier times. In the broadest sense, all clubs, whatever the specifics of their agendas, fulfill the fundamental function of this hardy cultural genre: they seek ways to unite people, to improve communication and self-expression, and to find pleasure in the process.

Translated by Benjamin M. Sutcliffe

## Notes

1. Georges Simenon (in translation) was particularly popular in Russia.
2. Such was the interpretation of these meetings offered by Marina Kiazevna in an issue of *Literaturnaia gazeta*, February 1992.
3. For a more detailed discussion of this club's history, agenda, and membership, see Azhgikhina and Goscilo.
4. The English Club has its own publication, *Litsa (Faces/Personalities)*, which, in addition to providing news about the club and its members, spotlights the rich and famous in the news.
5. V.A. Giliarovskii (1853-1935) was a writer renowned for his sketches of urban mores in prerevolutionary Moscow.
6. For more on this club, see Maheshwari.
7. With Raisa Gorbacheva's recent death, the fate of this club remains a question mark. (HG)

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